

# **How religious is the public sphere? – A critical stance on the debate about public religion and post-secularity.**

*Draft Version*

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## **Abstract**

Today, there is a new group of approaches in academic debates about religion which enjoys high popularity and engages concepts such as post-secularity, public religion, and desecularization. These approaches suppose that religion has an increasing presence in and impact on the public sphere of modern societies, including Western Europe. This paper questions these assumptions by arguing that the public presence and impact of

religion is widely overstated. An excessively vast definition of religion allows these approaches to identify religion in a wide variety of phenomena in the public sphere. Applying, instead, a more precise definition of religion, it appears that religious actors participate mainly in a non-religious way in the public sphere. Therefore, this paper argues that religious actors adapt their public communication to the requirements of a secularized public sphere in which religion assumes a public role only in very exceptional occasions and specific contexts. Finally, the author supposes that the current debates about public religion create a myth of past secularity. This myth wrongly suggests that there was a secular past in which religious actors were banned from the public sphere of modern societies.

**Keywords:** public religion, desecularization, post-secular society, public sphere  
deprivatization, secularization.

## **1) Introduction**

Public religion, desecularization, and post-secularity are the new buzzwords in the scientific study of religion. They mark a new era, perhaps a new paradigm, of academic thinking about religion. The supporters of this new trend purport that secularization theory was wrong: religion is neither disappearing nor suffering significant losses in the context of modernity. Instead, religion is as vivacious as ever. For many of these

observers, the age of secularity has ended – or, in fact, never existed – while religion is resurging: even the societies of Western Europe which once served as a prime example for secularization theory are experiencing a resurgence of religion. Here, the continuing and rising presence of religion becomes particularly manifest in the public sphere, according to this view. Religion is assuming a new public role and thereby refutes the long-standing assumption of a privatization of religion. However, are Western European societies currently experiencing such a deprivatization of religion? Are we facing a new age of public religion?

In today's academia, we face an increasing debate about the public role of religion. Concepts that highlight the public presence of religion enjoy a strong popularity and an almost unquestionable status. Nevertheless, it is unclear if this popularity is due to the fact that these approaches capture the empirical reality in an authentic way or if their popularity is rather the product of a 'hype' of these concepts in academic debates about religion. This article will take a critical stance on the assumption that Western Europe is experiencing a rising presence and impact of religion in its public sphere(s). Its objective is to question public-religion-approaches and to indicate some of their central flaws. The main argument is that the presence and importance of public religion in Western Europe is generally overstated. I will support this hypothesis by presenting different arguments that critically analyze public-religion-approaches and cast doubt on their theses. The term 'public-religion-approaches' will be

used in this article to refer to approaches that purport a significant and/or rising presence and impact of religion in the public sphere of modern societies.

Since public-religion-approaches refer to the presence of religion in the public sphere we should briefly define what the terms 'public sphere' and 'religion' mean. The public sphere can be defined as an open social arena in which a significant part of the population of a society participates passively- or actively. This arena (or: sphere) is dedicated to the gathering, production and distribution of information and opinions and is shaped by the presence of mass media (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991: 44-59). Modern societies embrace a variety of public and media spheres (Dalferth, 2010: 324). The most visible and crucial public sphere is perhaps the political public sphere. Its debates can potentially affect the whole population of a society and intermediate between the citizens of a society and its political system (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991). Public-religion-approaches often refer to this sphere, in which they posit a significant and/or rising presence of religion. Another definition that would be necessary here is a definition of religion. However, as we will see later, a central criticism in this article regards the absence of an appropriate definition in public-religion-approaches. To overcome this flaw, I will propose a rather classical and limited definition specifying religion as communications and/or practices referring to a supernatural reality.

The article is structured in the following way: it begins with a brief overview of the evolution of the academic debate about public religion. After this follows a section dedicated to the description of public-religion-approaches. In this section I will discuss some of the current studies and outline the common assumptions of public-religion-approaches. The next section presents my criticism of public-religion-approaches which is divided into seven points. The article ends with a short conclusion, summarizing the argument.

## **2) The evolution of the secularization-debate: From the ‘disappearance of religion’ to the ‘resurgence of public religion’**

The secularization thesis once constituted the most accepted and undisputed concept in the study of religion. It dominated academic debates about religion until the 1970s (Stark and Finke, 2000: 57-79). In the context of the secularization debate, the early Peter L. Berger (1990[1967]) and Thomas Luckmann (2000[1960]) were those who highlighted the privatization of religious belief. Peter L. Berger hypothesized that by means of socio-economic development, religion would be crowded out from the public sphere. The private sphere would remain the last sphere available for religious practice: religion would become a private issue (Berger, 1990[1967]: 127-53). Thomas Luckmann (2000[1960]) added to the idea of religious privatization while rejecting the

idea of secularization at the same time. Instead of asserting a decline of religion, he assumed that religion would just become 'invisible'. According to Luckmann, the social appearance of religion had been altered in modern societies and was now often hardly recognisable as religion. Religion was not disappearing or declining but just changing its form and becoming more individual and private. (Luckmann, 2000[1960], 1996).

According to this new thesis, religion would be banned from the public sphere and confined to the almost invisible private sphere of individuals. The practice of religion would become more and more a matter of private choice and cease to have any effect on the public sphere (See also Wilson, 1977: 176). This was the so-called 'privatization-thesis' of religion which redefined the secularization theory and became a mainstream position in the study of religion. In contrast to the classical secularization thesis, supporters of the 'privatization' thesis supposed a privatization of religion but not necessarily a decline in the individual practice of religion.

The dominance of the privatization thesis was challenged by the pioneering work of José Casanova (1994). In his ground-breaking book, 'Public Religions in the Modern World', Casanova subdivided the secularization thesis into three different hypotheses: (1) the functional differentiation of secular spheres from religion, (2) the decline of religious practice and belief, and (3) the privatization of religion. It was the third hypothesis, the privatization-thesis, which he tried to refute in this work. Instead of an advancing privatization of religion, Casanova supposed that in many modern

societies religion would still assume a public role. Moreover, a deprivatization of religion might even be taking place in many societies (Casanova, 1994: 41). He defined deprivatization in the following way:

*‘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.’* (Casanova, 1994: 5)

According to this view, the privatization of religion was not a necessary imperative of modern societies. In many cases religion maintained its public function and refused to be confined to a marginal, private role. In some cases religion might even assume a new and enhanced public role (Casanova, 1994: 39,215).

With the publication of ‘Public Religions in the Modern World’, Casanova coined the term ‘public religion’. The term refers to religion or religious organizations participating effectively in the public sphere of modern societies. The idea of public religion became increasingly salient in scientific debates and marked the beginning of a new discourse about religion in modern societies. Despite this success, Casanova has made several changes to his approach since the 1994 publication of his seminal work. He reacted to criticisms – that charged him with Western-centrism and methodological nationalism – by assuming a more global perspective and arguing that the predominant

concept of secularization is mainly a Western European ideology (Casanova 2003, 2006, 2008, 2011). At the same time, he maintained his general assumption of a deprivatization of religion and even extended the argument in two ways. First, Casanova became more open to the idea of religion acting in the political sphere. While he was keen to limit public religions in his earlier work to the domain of civil society, he states in his more recent publications that the presence of religion in the political public or even the state may not necessarily contradict the requirements of democratic politics. Second, he assumes a clearer position with regard to the case of Western Europe where he witnesses a rising presence of religion in the public sphere (Casanova 2006, 2008).

At least two other authors were crucial for promoting the idea of a resurgence of religion in politics and public affairs: Samuel P. Huntington (2003) and the late Peter Berger (1999). In his 'Clash of Civilizations' Samuel P. Huntington (2003) identified religion as a key factor for the presumed clash of different cultures. However, his general argument about the clash of civilizations was treated with scepticism among scholars of religion. Instead, the ideas of the late Peter Berger were more openly received in the academic discipline. Berger refuted his previous privatization thesis and argued in 'The Desecularization of the World' that the 'world today (..) is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever.' (Berger, 1999: 2)



Authors like Casanova shifted the academic debates about religion to a new direction toward a new paradigm, a paradigm which would declare the death of secularization theory and proclaim a rising public importance of religion in late modernity.<sup>1</sup>

### **3) Public-religion-approaches as a new trend in the study of religion**

Casanova's argument about public religion spurred the emergence of a new trend in the scientific study of religion. Rapidly, the idea of public religion spread and gained popularity within academic debates. From this point on, one could observe an increasing number of publications rejecting the privatization thesis of religion and claiming a 'deprivatization' and/ or comeback of religion. Academic and public debates began to insinuate a rising role of religion in the public sphere of modern societies. The idea of the persistent and mounting importance of religion in the public sphere of modern societies almost achieved the status of a truism in academic discourses.

Today's academic discourse about public religion is a transdisciplinary one in which different academic fields such as sociology, political and religious sciences, theology and philosophy participate (Meyer and Moore 2006, Meyer 2006b). Although the contributions may draw on different disciplinary backgrounds, they all have at least one thing in common: they refer to the presence of religion in the public sphere of modern societies. Therefore, I will group them under the umbrella term 'public-religion-

approaches'. The assumptions and hypotheses of public-religion-approaches vary according to the particular theory. But we can identify common assumptions:

- Religion can be empirically found in the public sphere of modern, Western societies.
- There is a persistent – or even rising – presence of religion in the public sphere of modern, societies.
- Religion has a significant – and/or increasing – impact on public debates.

These assumptions characterize – with some variation – what I define here as public-religion-approaches. This characterization forms a generalization which implies that the description and the following arguments do not correspond to every contribution to the debate about public religion. The aim of this article is not to create an exhaustive description of the variety of public religion approaches, but to point to some frequent flaws in the debate about public religion in the Western European context. Although some of the arguments could also be raised with regard to the general debate about public religion, the arguments in this article will draw particularly on contributions assuming a rising presence of religion in Western Europe's public.

One can classify public religion approaches that refer to Western Europe into roughly three 'camps': first, approaches witnessing and welcoming a new presence of religion in Europe's public; second, approaches describing a new presence of religion without assuming a normative position; and third, a very small camp of approaches

viewing the impact of public religion on Europe's democracies critically. In the following, I will mention some examples for each camp.

The most famous author from the first camp is Jürgen Habermas (2001, 2005, 2006, 2008). He argues that a new age, the age of post-secularity, has begun. Previously vastly secularized societies, like the highly developed countries of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, would experience a new awareness of religion and attribute a new public role to religion. From now on, religion would constitute a relevant dialogue partner in the public debates of these societies (Habermas, 2008). Moreover, Habermas presents a normative argument about public religion: he recommends that post-secular societies should facilitate religious contributions to the public sphere. Religious reasoning could contribute to public debates about the ethical values of contemporaneous and future societies. Habermas believes that modern societies might find some answers to the moral questions of our time by listening to religion in public debates (Habermas, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2008). A similar position to that of Habermas is proposed by Leclerc (2001) and French sociologist Willaime (2004a, 2004b, 2005[1995]: 76-78, 2008). Willaime observes that even the highly secularized public and political sphere of France is exhibiting a new, more open attitude towards religion. The hypersecularity of France would stimulate a restructuration process of religion. According to Willaime, religion can form an important resource for public debates and be engaged in the identity construction process of individuals and collectives.

Contributions from this camp emphasize the positive role that religion can play as a discursive resource in public debates of (post-secular) societies.

The second camp assumes a more descriptive perspective by observing and explaining the supposed presence of public religion in Western Europe. The most prominent example of this camp would be, of course, José Casanova. Another famous sociologist of religion who addresses the topic of public religion in her recent work is Grace Davie (2006a, 2006b). She believes that the immigration of individuals from different parts of the world has put the European model of secularization into question. While the European secularization model advances the privatization of religion, many of the 'newcomers' have different ideas with regard to the appropriate place of religion in society. Consequently, Europeans do not only have to launch debates about the public role of religion, but religion also becomes increasingly present in Western Europe's public:

*„[r]eligion will increasingly penetrate the public sphere, a tendency driven largely by the presence of Islam in different parts of Europe.” (Davie 2006a: 33)*

Two further examples for this camp are Koenig and Eder. Koenig (2008) argues that religion has gained a new presence and vitality in the public in the context of

the European unification process. According to him, the process of European integration is resulting in a new, privileged role of religion in the European public. Klaus Eder (Eder, 2002; Bosseti and Eder, 2006) supposes, similarly to Habermas, the existence of a process of 'post-secularization'. Post-Secularization, according to Eder, means that religion is becoming more and more public and less private. He supposes that religion is returning to the public sphere in Western Europe. Although the authors from this camp generally assume a descriptive perspective, they tend in some occasions toward positions similar to that of the first camp by pointing to the positive potential of religion.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the last camp views the alleged presence of religion in the public sphere from a more critical perspective. One example for the last camp is Thomas Meyer (2006, 2007). Thomas Meyer posits that religion is becoming increasingly involved in the public and political sphere. He regards this process, in opposition to Habermas, Willaime and Leclerc, not as positive but as a potential threat to the secular foundations of the modern state. However, Meyers' point of view does not seem to reflect the common position of public religion approaches. In general, scholars rather appear to welcome the supposed new presence of religion in Western Europe's public sphere(s).

This classification provides a brief overview of contributions that assume an increasing presence of religion in Western Europe's public spheres. In addition to this

literature that stresses the case of Western Europe, there is a wide range of studies that address the topic of public religion (Boettcher and Harmon (2009), Bottici (2009), During (2005), Dreyer and Pieterse (2010), Kettel (2009), Lichterman (2007), Birgit Meyer (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008), Meyer and Moore (2006), Mörschl (2006), Philpott (2007), Riesebrodt (2001), Vries, Sullivan, and Ward (2008), Ward (2006), Ziebertz and Riegel (2010)). These contributions form part of an increasing academic debate which circulates around the idea of public religion. None of these studies questions critically if there is indeed a significant or rising presence of religion in the public sphere of modern Western societies.

The existing and still rising number of publications concerning public religion illustrates that Casanova's ideas have become a popular concept in the academic debate about religion. Today, the concept of public religion is perhaps the most 'trendy' approach in the scientific discourse about religion. Criticism of the idea of public religion is rare, if not absent. One exception is perhaps Dalferth (2010), who points out that post-secular societies are indifferent towards religion instead of being religious or secular.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4) A critical stance on public-religion-approaches**

In this section I will critically analyze public-religion-approaches. The principal argument is that public-religion-approaches overstate the presence and impact of religion in the public sphere of modern societies, particularly Western Europe.

The argument is divided into seven points. I start by stressing the fact that most public-religion-approaches lack an explicit definition of religion. In the second point, I try to detect the implicit definition of religion in these approaches. It turns out that public-religion-approaches utilize excessively wide and vague definitions of religion. Therefore, I will raise a more restricted definition of religion. Based on the new definition, I will discuss in the following points the absence of religious reasoning in public communication and the fact that religion in the public sphere of Western European societies is an exceptional case which is reserved for specific contexts. Finally, I will describe how these approaches create a myth of past secularity.

##### **a) The absence of a definition of religion**

Most public-religion-approaches lack an accurate definition of religion. What these approaches mean by referring to public religion remains an open question since they do not provide an explicit definition of religion. They do not clarify which social phenomena are of a 'religious nature' and which phenomena are not. Thus, they can potentially declare a variety of different phenomena in the public sphere as religion. The

absence of an explicit definition may be partly due to the often cited difficulties to define religion. Many scholars of religion suppose that it is mostly or even totally impossible to define religion in an appropriate way (cf. Matthes 1992, 1993; Smith 1982, Tennbruck 1993; see for a critical discussion of this debate Riesebrodt 2007).

But even so, social scientists should at least roughly declare what their subject of study is and what general characteristics it has. This is even more important when the basic argument is that there is a significant presence of a phenomenon X in a specific social sphere. To prove that there is X in this sphere, we will have to outline what X is beforehand. The omission of a definition of X will necessarily lead to arbitrary judgements about the presence of X. This is today the case in the academic debates about public religion. The fact that religion is not defined facilitates its detection everywhere scholars regard it as useful for their own observations. The 'identification' of religion in the public sphere becomes an arbitrary act.

Defining religion does not mean to determine the essence and 'real nature' of religion and to provide an irrefutable distinction between religion and non-religious social phenomena. Rather, a definition can constitute a pragmatic basis for the empirical and theoretical work by clarifying what is regarded as religion. Thereby, the definition helps to reduce the probability of arbitrary conclusions about the presence of religion. It goes without saying that there are various valid definitions of religion which may serve for different topics.



**b) The implicit definition: An excessively wide concept of religion**

As stated before, most public-religion-approaches lack an explicit definition of religion. One has to infer how these approaches define religion by analysing their comments about public religion. Thus, we can deduce their concept of religion from examples of public religion. However, many of the contributions to the debate on public religion do not include empirical examples, so it is hard to imagine what is meant by the idea of public religion. In other cases, studies give empirical examples. In these cases they attribute the idea of public religion generally to two types of communication. First, the concept of public religion is attributed to mass media communication and public debates about topics that are somehow related to religion. Prominent examples mentioned in the literature are the assassination of the Dutch film-maker Theo Van Gogh, the reactions to the publication of the 'Danish' cartoons depicting Mohammed, the debate about the use of religious symbols in public buildings, the EU accession of Turkey, and the riots in French *banlieus* in late 2005 (cf. Casanova 2009, Davie 2006b, 2009; Habermas 2008). In these examples, a topic which is at least partly attributed to religion is moved into the spotlight of public debates. Second, public religion approaches refer to communications or actions that are emitted by religious actors – such as individuals, groups or organizations associated with religion. Casanova, for instance, uses the concept of public religion with regard to Catholics and/or

Evangelicals rising up against dictatorships, social injustice or the legalization of abortion (Casanova 1994). Habermas (2008), as another example, alludes to the Archbishop of Canterbury who proposed that the British legislature should adapt parts of the Sharia-law for its Muslim population. In these examples, a religious actor publicly supports a specific normative and/or political position.

Hence, there are two types of communication to which public religion approaches frequently refer as public religion. But are these types of communication religious? In the first case, there is public communication about topics which are regarded as related to religion. This type of communication may refer to religion but does not necessarily consist of religious communication. The same is also true for the communication of religious actors. Not every public communication or practice undertaken by a religious actor is necessarily religious. The 'religious nature' of these two types of communication is not evident. I will clarify this point by stressing the example of religious actors communicating in the public sphere.

Public-religion-approaches attribute the term 'religion' to statements or actions from organizations, groups or individuals associated with religion. Regarding this concept of religion, we may question if everything what actors which are associated with religion communicate or do is necessarily religion. Is it religion if a religious leader mentions to a friend that he has to diet due to a health issue? And if he manifests it publicly should we define his communication then as public religion?

This enquiry leads to the question of what features a particular communication should have to be defined properly as religious. If the only criterion which defines a communication as religious is the fact that the communicating individual is strongly associated with a religious organization, then every communication transmitted by this actor must be defined as religious. This includes his comments about his eating and drinking habits, the weather, sports, and other leisure time activities. Consequently, an individual associated with religion, could not communicate in a non-religious way. With such a definition we lose the possibility of differentiating between religious and non-religious communication from actors who are associated with religion. The preaching of an evangelical pastor against the demons of modern life and his prayers for the salvation of his members would be equally religious to him complaining about the scruffy shape of public transport and corruption among municipal authorities. We can transfer this argument back to the public sphere: Here, an evangelical leader predicting publicly the end of times and the return of Jesus would be equally religious to him explaining publicly the structural reorganization of the church and the reduction of church personal. Are these two types of communication equally religious? Or should we rather acknowledge that actors related to religious organizations can also communicate in a non-religious way? If so, we need to develop a criterion which distinguishes between religious and non-religious communication from religious actors. Public-religion-approaches do not provide a definition which would allow such a distinction. They tend

to attribute the term religion to communication from religious actors regardless of the content of the communication. It is dubious to which extent such a concept of religion still reflects the common meaning of the term.

The implicit concept of religion which is held by public-religion-approaches is an excessively 'wide' one which renders it impossible to distinguish religion clearly from other types of communication and practice.<sup>4</sup> Applying the term 'religion' to a variety of social phenomena – which are hardly of a 'religious nature' – allows the supporters of public-religion-approaches to diagnose an unprecedented presence of religion in the public sphere of modern societies. Hence, the new visibility of religion seems to be less due to a change in the empirical reality than to a broadening of the definition of religion.

In order to determine if religion has a significant presence in the public sphere of modern societies, it is necessary to apply an appropriate definition of religion. We need a clear and limiting definition which enables us to distinguish between religious and non-religious social phenomena in the public sphere.

One exception among public religion approaches is Birgit Meyer.<sup>5</sup> She presents a practical and limited definition of religion. Religion is conceptualized by her as the mediation of transcendence. Religions create a distance between the individual and the supernatural and mediate this difference by offering mediated links to the supernatural (Meyer/Moore 2006: 7, Meyer 2006a: 290, 2006b: 6, 13, 2006c: 435). Such mediation

implies, of course, the use of references to transcendence. In the following I draw on this approach by defining religion as communication and/or practice that refers to a supernatural – transcendent – reality. This definition is perhaps the most common and simple definition in the sociology of religion (cf. Stark and Finke 2000: 89-96, Luhmann 2000, Riesebrodt 2007, Schäfer 2009). At the same it corresponds to the phenomena that are generally described as religion in a Western cultural context. Most importantly, it renders religion easily distinguishable from other types of social practice and communication, be them political, scientific, economic or moral etc. Therefore, it allows us to exclude some phenomena that other definitions generously consider to be religion. As a result of this definition, we can say that communications and practices which do not refer to a supernatural sphere or entity (transcendent reality) are not religious and should not be subsumed under the term ‘religion’.

Religious communication takes place when supernatural concepts such as ‘hell’, ‘Jesus Christ’, ‘Satan’, ‘God's will’ etc. are applied: an evangelical pastor publicly saying that we must eradicate poverty because it is God's will or claiming that homosexuality is the work of satanic forces would be examples of public religion. Therefore religious communication involves explicit references to entities that are defined as supernatural. In order to define social phenomena as religion, one would also have to take the context into account. There is a difference between the word ‘God’ being used in a church service and by a speaker at a sociological conference about

religion. In the latter case one, would hardly define the communication of the speaker as religious communication. Although it is important to take the context of the communication into account, for the sake of simplicity I will largely refrain from the context and stress the use of references to the supernatural as the main feature of religion.

**c) The secularity of ‘religious’ contributions to the public sphere**

According to the definition proposed above, I will use the reference to the supernatural as a criterion for the presence of religion. Keeping this criterion in mind, one can examine if actions and communications that are generally denominated as ‘religion’ by public-religion-approaches fit this definition of religion. I have mentioned two types of communication to which public religion approaches refer: 1) public debates about topics related to religion and 2) contributions of religious actors to the public sphere. Regarding the first type, it is evident that public debates about topics related to religion do usually not fulfil the criterion for religious communication. For instance, mass media reports of the killing of the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh referred to the religious motives of the perpetrator but did not employ religious communication themselves while describing the event, for instance, as God’s revenge. Western European mass media coverage of topics related to religion will generally not employ any type of

mediation with the supernatural and is therefore hardly of a religious nature. Instead public agents will use a secular scheme of reasoning abstaining from references to the supernatural.

The second type of communication is more complicated. Religious actors often represent a religious organization when they emit public communication. Yet, not every public contribution from religious actors is necessarily a religious communication. According to the proposed definition, only those public communications which apply a religious argument by referring to a supernatural entity or concept are religious.

Organizations, groups and individuals associated with religion can involve themselves in different ways in the public sphere. Representatives of religious organizations can participate in a direct way in the public sphere by joining, for instance, TV talk shows, or radio programs. Moreover, they can publish their opinions in books, journals, or on web-pages. One of the most important ways of public communication for religious actors is the release of press statements. Thus, in order to explore the public communication of a religious organization, one can analyse its press statements. One can take, for instance, the press-releases, from the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany. Both institutions represent a large share of the religious market in their home-countries and are therefore assumed to be highly influential religious actors in the public sphere. But is their public communication religious?

We can answer this question by looking at press statements of these institutions. Press statements about different public issues can be found on the webpage of the Evangelical Church in Germany. These statements include topics such as the ratification of the European treaty (title: 'The world needs a strong Europe!'), fall of the Berlin Wall, right wing radicalism in Germany, and norms and values in the finance sector (Evangelical Church in Germany, 2010). The press statements published on the webpage of the Evangelical Church in Germany consider mainly secular topics and do not involve religious language. The Church of England shows the same tendency. Among its news releases in November and December 2009 figure titles such as 'Ban product placement on TV should remain, says Church', 'Archbishops' statement on swine flu', and 'Use cash not credit cards, say new videocasts helping Christmas shopper stay on budget' (Church of England, 2010). In the press statements I read, religious language was absent: there were no references to supernatural concepts like god, hell, heaven etc. Their reasoning was, instead, based exclusively on secular arguments. Daniel Meier (2006) observes a similar pattern in his study about the Evangelical and Catholic Church in the German print media. Their press statements mainly tackle secular – ethical or organizational – topics and abstain from religious argumentation.

But not only press releases also the participation of representatives of religious organizations in TV debates and radio programs appear to be rather secular. Their



contributions assume generally a non-religious character. Instead of referring to the will of God, representatives of Christian churches will justify their opinion and demands with non-religious arguments.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, sophisticated research would be necessary to verify if this is a general pattern in the public communication of religious actors in Western Europe. Such research would have to study in a comprehensive form the way in which religious organizations communicate in the public sphere and if their public communications refer to supernatural concepts. Yet, at a brief glance it appears that there is a tendency among religious individuals, groups and organisations to abstain from religious communication in the public sphere of Western European societies. Their public communication stays widely free of religious concepts.

Public-religion-approaches describe public statements from religious actors as a manifestation of public religion. Their hypothesis of a persistent and rising presence of religion in the public sphere is based on the involvement of religious actors in the public sphere. But considering the way in which these actors involve in the public sphere, it seems as though their public contributions are mainly non-religious. Similarly to non-religious actors they use non-religious communication to make contributions to public debates. Hence, it is not evident why their contributions should be classified as more religious than the contributions of other, non-religious actors in the public sphere. In the

light of these observations, public religion as posited by public-religion-approaches vanishes. What remains is non-religious communication conducted by religious actors.

In addition to this point, one could scrutinize the impact of public communications emitted by religious actors. The real impact of these contributions on public debates is questionable. Regarding the example of the Archbishop of Canterbury proposing Sharia law, one could argue that even in the case that religious actors manage to communicate their arguments to a wide audience, they are often not taken seriously in public debates.

#### **d) The secularity of the public sphere of modern, Western societies**

Religious organizations, groups and individuals tend to communicate in a non-religious way in the political public sphere. Since they are primarily defined as religious actors we may wonder why they communicate in a non-religious rather than in a religious way in the public sphere.

The most compelling explanation for the secularity of their public communication is that religious actors adapt to the requirements of a secular public sphere. The political public sphere of Western-European societies can be characterized as a non-religious sphere. Religious reasoning is not literally banned from the public sphere, but it is not considered to be an appropriate form of communication in public debates. Communications referring to the will of the supernatural, for instance, would lack any common ground and connectivity in a public political debate. There would be very little

prospect for such communication to be picked up by other public agents (mass media, commentators, politicians etc.) in a serious manner.

The secularity of the public sphere is due to a wider secularization process which was prominently described by secularization theorists such as Steve Bruce (Wallis and Bruce, 1992, Bruce, 2003, 2010). The process of functional differentiation in Western European societies has led to religious communication and reasoning being increasingly excluded from the political public sphere. The public sphere has become a non-religious sphere. Thus, the reasoning and logic involved in public debates are fundamentally secular and alien to religious reasoning. That does not mean that religious actors cannot try to involve themselves in the public sphere. Obviously, they participate in public debates. But they do not deploy religious concepts to do so. Religious organizations adapt to the secularity of public debates by communicating in a non-religious way. Thereby they improve their chances of being heard and acknowledged in public debates. Otherwise they would possibly be ignored or mocked.

Even Casanova (1994) assumes in his early work that religious organizations, in order to effectively engage in the public sphere, would have to commit themselves to the functional differentiation between religion and other social spheres. Nevertheless, the unspoken standard appears to be even more demanding by requiring religious actors to commit themselves to secular communication and to refrain from religious reasoning.

Consequently, the public sphere is a social context from which religion is widely excluded. In public debates religion can hardly be involved in a direct manner. Nevertheless, in specific social contexts religion does seem to be a convenient mode of communication in the public sphere, as the two following points will show. But these contexts remain marginal and are of a minor impact in the public.

**e) Public religion as an exceptional case**

Despite the secularity of the public sphere, the modern 'ban' on public religion is not absolute. There are exceptions. Religion may become public when exceptional, incomprehensible events of major public impact occur in a society. Examples of these are major catastrophes or emotional events that can hardly be grasped in rational terms. In these cases religion may assume a public function: by offering a ritual and a scheme of interpretation which refers to a transcendent reality, religion can help citizens to overcome the experience of such events and transform them into a more meaningful complexity. Public memorial services may, for instance, be conducted by religious organizations and broadcasted on the national television channels on such occasions.<sup>7</sup> However, after such events occur, religion disappears rapidly from the public scene.

Public religion deals with exceptional events. Religion in the main areas of the public sphere is limited to these very specific contexts which enable religion to enter the public sphere for a short time. In everyday debates of the public sphere there is no place

for religion. They constitute a different social context which is not accessible for religion, as described above.

Hence, there is only a very limited presence of religion in the central spots of the public sphere while religious communication remains excluded from the everyday political public debates.

#### **f) Religious niches in the public sphere**

There are different public spheres in modern societies. The wider public sphere of modern societies consists of a variety of different publics which focus on different topics and are based on different logics. The public sphere which attracts most attention and forms the key area of the public is the political public sphere. Besides this, there are other public spheres which correspond to specific sub-systems of the society (Dalferth 2010). Among these, there are specific public spheres in which religious communication is facilitated or even requested. In some sites of Western Europe's media space we can observe religious communication on a daily bases, such as religious TV and radio programs, journals and internet pages. They form public niches which are dedicated to religious communication. Here, religious actors can communicate in a religious way and refer to supernatural concepts without being rejected or mocked. Yet, these spheres are located in the periphery of the media space and constitute small and remote isles of religious communication. Individuals may publicly communicate and practice religion

on a daily basis in these media spaces, but their communication stays remote from the key areas of the public sphere.

These niches of religious communication are different from the political public sphere. They are neither involved nor directly connected to the political public sphere. The fact that religious communication takes place in the remote periphery of the public indicates the position and role of religious communication in the public sphere of Western European societies: it is marginal. In the main arenas of the public sphere religion forms an exceptional case for very seldom occasions, while the daily media appearance of religion is situated in the remote periphery of the public.

**g) The myth of past secularity**

Public-religion-approaches posit that there is a new presence of religion in the public sphere of modern societies. Religion is becoming more and more public. By suggesting that religion is more public than it has been before, they – directly or indirectly – create an image of a secular past in which communication from religious actors was almost or totally absent from the public sphere (Dalferth, 2010: 323).

Especially the increasingly popular notion of ‘post-secular society’ suggests that there was an entirely secular age which is now replaced by a new stage of social evolution: the post-secular society. While religion was marginalized and religious actors were not permitted to participate in the public of the secular society, the post-secular

society would now assign a new, enhanced public role to religion (Habermas, 2008). Yet, approaches which purport a new or rising presence of religion do not present any data which would support this assumption.

Was there ever a secular age? Was there ever a total ban on or disregard of public statements from religious actors in Western Europe's public spheres? Analogically to what Stark and Finke call the myth of past piety (Stark 1999; Stark and Finke, 2000: 63-68) we can observe modern scholars of religion engaging in constructing a new myth: the myth of past secularity.<sup>8</sup> Terms like post-secularity, desecularization and deprivatization of religion spur the idea of a past secularity. Such an age of secularity hardly existed in Western Europe. Public communication from religious actors never suffered a total ban or disregard in the public sphere of modern societies. Religious actors always participated in its public debates; even if their contributions were and are mainly of a non-religious character. Instead of a new public presence of religion there seems to be rather a new attention towards religion in the academic discourses (cf. Pollack, 2006).

## **5) Conclusion**

The purpose of this article was to raise some critical questions regarding public-religion-approaches. Public-religion-approaches emphasize the public presence and

impact of religion in modern societies. They posit a significant and/or rising impact of religion on the public sphere of modern societies, including Western Europe. However, their conclusions about a significant presence and impact of religion are based on diffuse and excessively wide concepts of religion. Applying the term 'religion' to a variety of social phenomena – which are often hardly of a religious nature – allows them to diagnose an unprecedented impact and presence of religion in the public sphere. Using a more restricted definition of religion, many phenomena described as religion by public-religion-approaches turn out to be non-religious. Religious actors – such as religious organizations, groups or individuals – appear to prefer the use of non-religious communication when participating in the public sphere. Therefore, it is questionable that there is a rise of public religion or a major presence of religion in Western Europe's public spheres. Public religion does not appear to be a daily phenomenon: it remains rather limited to exceptional cases and contexts. Instead of becoming more and more religious, the public sphere continues to be mainly a secular sphere in which religious actors participate by conducting non-religious communication. Rather than reflecting the empirical reality, the assumption of a rise of 'public religion' seems to be merely a theoretical trend in the academic community.

The arguments raised here indicate some general flaws of public-religion-approaches and question their assumption of a significant and/or rising presence of religion on the public sphere of modern societies. However, in order to really determine



the degree to which religious communication and practice does or does not play a role in the main areas of Western Europe's public spheres, a comprehensive empirical research would be necessary. Such a study should be based on a clear and limited definition of religion.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One of the first authors to indicate the formation of a new paradigm in the academic study of religion was Stephan Warner (1993). The 'death of secularization' was proclaimed by Stark (1999) and Stark and Finke (2000) on the basis of their rational choice theory of religion. Although strongly related to the secularization debate rational choice theory is not directly linked to the debate about public religion since rational choice theory focuses on the second of the three secularizations hypotheses mentioned by Casanova (1994) arguing that the vitality of religious practice and belief is not related to modernization but to religious market competition.

<sup>2</sup> Grace Davie (2009), for instance argues in an article published in *The Guardian* that "Europe should recall its religious heritage rather than deny it (...)" (Davie 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> Dalferth states: ‘Thus, a post-secular state is indifferent to questions of religion or non-religion, and not merely neutral: There may be many religions and non-religions in society, but the state does not bother to define its relations to them in a particular way.’

(Dalferth, 2010: 335)

<sup>4</sup> A positive exception among public-religion-approaches is Eder’s approach since he defines religion in a more explicit way. He describes religion as communication about identity. Religion is defined by its function to construct social and individual identity by bridging between past, present and future (Eder, 2002: 9). Yet, his definition remains also excessively wide since there are many types of communication which can serve this purpose without necessarily being religious.

<sup>5</sup> Meyer (2006a, 2008) presents some innovative research about religion and media in Ghana. Unfortunately, Meyer has so far not explored religious media in Western societies. With regard to the lack of studies about religion and media in Western Europe (Davie 2000: 104) it could result to be very fruitful for the debate about public religion to apply Meyers approach to the study of public religion in Western Europe.

<sup>6</sup> An interesting example for this tendency gives also Schmalzbauer (2002). He shows for the case of the US that religiously convicted Evangelical and Catholic journalists either avoid any reference to their religious convictions or translate their religious convictions into a professional, secular language which is – if at all – only very distantly

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related to religion. Religious language is not regarded as a suitable form of communication in the public sphere.

<sup>7</sup> The functional perspective to religion which is mentioned here derives from Luhmann's theory of religion. He defines the function of religion as the transformation of unknown, indefinable complexity into definable complexity by applying the religious code of transcendence (supernatural) and immanence (Luhmann, 2000). An empirical example for this function in the public sphere could be the suicide of the German national keeper Robert Enke in 2009. His suicide shocked the German public. Several memorial services, marches and devotions of major public impact took place. Thus, the subsequent religious treatment of his suicide may serve as an example of public religion. Another very popular international example would be the death of Diana Spencer (Lady Di).

<sup>8</sup> Gorski (2000) rebutted Stark and Finke's (2000) hypothesis of an almost unchristian medieval Europe on the basis of various studies showing that the medieval age was significantly more Christian than Stark and Finke supposed. Yet, the notion 'post-secular society' introduced by Habermas appears to stipulate the existence of a secular period in the more recent past lasting perhaps until the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, Habermas and other supporters of this idea do not clarify why the period in question was – in contrast to the current period – of a (more) secular nature.

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