

# Islam, Gender, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective

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## Catholicism, Gender, Secularism, and Democracy

### Comparative Reflections

*José Casanova*

This is not a detailed comparative historical study of the role of gender or secularism in processes of democratization in Catholic countries in the so-called Catholic “third wave” of democratization. It only aims to offer some comparative reflections on some distinctive patterns that distinguish the relatively successful processes of democratization in majoritarian Catholic countries from the still more uncertain and contested processes of democratization in Muslim countries which are the focus of this volume.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it offers an interpretation as to why issues of secularism and gender, which have become so contested and entangled in processes of democratization in Muslim countries, did not play a significant role in transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes in Catholic contexts. When highly divisive and politically contested issues of “gender,” such as the legalization of divorce, abortion, or same-sex marriage, emerged on the legislative agenda in most Catholic countries, democratic regimes had already been consolidated. Certainly, as in the United States and in many other advanced democracies, those divisive moral issues led to “culture wars” and to political polarization, which, in some contexts, revived old clerical/anti-clerical and religious/secular cleavages. But those political conflicts took place within broadly accepted constitutional and democratic rules of the game and those cleavages within civil and political society did not endanger the stability of democratic regimes nor present a serious threat of democratic breakdown.

The so-called “third wave” of democratization, which began in 1974/5 with democratic transitions in Greece, Portugal, and Spain, continued throughout

<sup>1</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).



Latin America and some Asian countries in the 1980s, spread throughout Eastern Europe after 1989, and culminated with South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, has rightly been called a "Catholic" wave.<sup>2</sup> Roughly two thirds of the approximately thirty countries that underwent successful transitions to democracy since the mid-1970s were majoritarian Catholic countries. This in itself points to the fact that a majority of Catholic countries in the 1960s had authoritarian regimes, many of them initially supported by the Catholic Church, by various forms of "political Catholicism," or by Catholic militant groups. Not all authoritarian regimes in majoritarian Catholic countries were supported by the Catholic Church. Some, such as the Soviet-type regimes in Eastern Europe, espoused radical forms of secularism and were openly anti-Catholic. What distinguished the third wave of democratization from previous waves, however, was the fact that, for the first time in history, the Catholic Church, Catholic movements, and lay as well as religious Catholic elites played consistently proactive and positive roles in processes of democratization in most Catholic countries. It was, moreover, the first time historically that Catholicism itself had not been the source of religious/secular cleavages of the kind that had often accompanied political transformations in Catholic countries since the mid-1800s. Although such cleavages reappeared later in various electoral contexts, at least at the time of the transitions they were significantly diminished.

In a sense, it is appropriate to call it a Catholic wave, not just because the countries in which it occurred happened to be Catholic, but because the transformation of Catholicism connected with the Vatican II *aggiornamento* was itself an important independent factor in producing the wave. Indeed, Catholic groups also played a prominent role, disproportionate to their size, in the democratic transitions of countries such as South Korea and South Africa, where Catholics comprised less than 10 percent of the population.<sup>3</sup>

As I have emphasized throughout my writings, the most important historical consequence of the Vatican *aggiornamento* was the transformation of the Catholic Church from a state-centered to a civil society-centered institution.<sup>4</sup> Two Vatican II Council documents, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, were particularly crucial in this transformation.

The recognition of the inalienable right of every individual to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, based on the sacred dignity of the human

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> José Casanova, "Civil Society and Religion: Retrospective Reflections on Catholicism and Prospective Reflections on Islam," *Social Research* 68/4 (2001): 1041-80.

<sup>4</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).



person, means that the church abandons its compulsory character and becomes a "free church." Truth can no longer be imposed, nor is it permissible to coerce individual consciences to follow external dictates. The old saying "error has no rights" was abandoned. Not doctrines, but persons have rights. Beginning with Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961), the church appropriated the modern discourse of human rights, leaving behind a long history of repeated categorical official condemnations of modern human rights principles that goes back to Pius VI's condemnation of the French National Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Man in his Brief *Caritas* (1791). Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) reiterated most emphatically the condemnation of the principle of religious freedom as well as the separation of church and state.<sup>5</sup>

The immediate historical consequences of the declaration on religious freedom were: (a) the acceptance of the modern secular principle of disestablishment and separation of church and state; (b) the contestability of any Catholic party or political movement officially sponsored by the Catholic Church; and (c) in the long run the incompatibility of a dogmatic conception of authoritative tradition and the principle of freedom of conscience. In fact, a comparative analysis of transitions to democracy and of processes of constitution-making in Catholic countries during the third wave confirms not only the church's voluntary disestablishment from the state, but also its disengagement from political society proper.<sup>6</sup>

Only in Poland was disestablishment at first not fully voluntary. In 1991, Primate Cardinal Glemp presented an ambiguous public proposal to repeal the constitutional separation of church and state inherited from the communist regime on the dubiously democratic grounds that the rule of the Catholic majority would require the constitutional recognition of the religious confession of the majority of Polish citizens. But in the face of public resistance and, apparently and more significantly, the disapproval of the Vatican and of the Polish Pope, the church did not press the issue.<sup>7</sup> In fact, while every other branch of Christianity (Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Orthodox) still maintains some kind of formal establishment in some European country, the Catholic Church eschewed establishment in every (post-1974) transition to democracy in Southern Europe (Portugal, Spain) and in Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> José Casanova, "The Sacralization of the *Humanum*: A Theology for a Global Age," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 13/1 (1999): 21-40.

<sup>6</sup> José Casanova, "Global Catholicism and the Politics of Civil Society," *Sociological Inquiry* 66/3 (1996): 356-73.

<sup>7</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions*, pp. 110-13.

<sup>8</sup> José Casanova, "The Problem of Religion and the Anxieties of European Democracy," in *Religion and Democracy in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Gabriel Motzkin and Yochi Fischer (London: Alliance Publishing Trust, 2008), pp. 63-74.



Indeed, the preamble to Poland's constitution shows how a majoritarian Catholic country was able to pragmatically solve the thorny question of any reference to God, to the Christian heritage, or to the secular values of the Enlightenment better than was the case with the rejected European constitution. The compromise wording suggested by ex-Prime Minister and Catholic intellectual Tadeusz Mazowiecki offers a non-laicist consensual solution to the constitution of a secular state:

We the people of Poland . . . all the Polish citizens, both those who believe in God, who is the source of truth, justice, goodness and mercy, as well as those who do not share this faith and derive the values they recognize from other sources, equal in rights and obligations toward the common good . . . recognizing our responsibility before God or one's own conscience . . . pass this constitution.<sup>9</sup>

Respecting the dual principle of "no establishment" and "free exercise," as well as Alfred Stepan's "twin tolerations,"<sup>10</sup> Article 25 of the Polish constitution reads:

1. Churches and other religious organizations shall have equal rights.
2. Public authorities in the Republic of Poland shall be impartial in matters of personal conviction, whether religious or philosophical, or in relation to outlooks on life, and shall ensure their freedom of expression within public life.
3. The relations between the State and churches and other religious organizations shall be based on the principle of respect for their autonomy and the mutual independence of each in its own sphere.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, there has not emerged in any constitution-making process in Catholic countries an establishment clause controversy similar or equivalent to the official declaration of Shari'a as either *a* source or *the* source of legislation. The Catholic Church has accepted generally the secularity of the state and of state legislation, putting an end to long struggles over Catholic establishment and secular disestablishment since the French Revolution. This does not mean that the church accepts the principles of *laïcité* in the sense of "assertive" state secularism or restriction of religion to the private sphere. On the contrary, the relocation of the church from state to civil society and the adoption of the discourse of human rights together with the final acceptance of the legitimacy of the modern *saeculum*, as defined in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, is what grounds Catholicism as a modern *public religion* in civil society.

<sup>9</sup> Constitute, "Poland's Constitution of 1997," *Constituteproject.org*, April 18, 2016, <[http://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Poland\\_1997.pdf](http://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Poland_1997.pdf)> (accessed October 10, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations,'" *Journal of Democracy* 11/4 (2000): 37–57.

<sup>11</sup> Constitute, "Poland's Constitution of 1997," p. 3.



In fact, the political engagement of the faithful, the religious as well as the laity, in the transformation of the world and action on behalf of peace, social justice, human rights, and liberation from any kind of oppression that undermines the dignity of the human person, will be defined from now on in the Council documents, in papal encyclicals, and in the pastoral letters of episcopal conferences throughout the world as a constitutive dimension of the People of God's divine mission.

As remarkable as the voluntary disestablishment from the state was the church's disengagement from political society proper. From a political science perspective, one of the most surprising outcomes of the third wave of democratization was that, despite the prominent role played by Catholic elites, groups, and social movements in so many transitions, and despite the influence and prestige the church gained thereby almost everywhere, not a single major Catholic party emerged out of any of the transitions of the third wave: not in Spain, not in Brazil, not in the Philippines, not in Poland.

Indeed, one can speak confidently of the end of the historical era of "political Catholicism," of the end of Catholic parties, and, in this sense, of the end of Christian democracy (though some Christian democratic parties may have survived with a much diminished Catholic identity in countries such as Germany or Chile), and of the collapse of Catholic Action, the main form of Catholic political mobilization throughout the twentieth century. The case of Spain is instructive. Political Catholicism never made the transition to Christian Democracy during the embattled politics of the Second Spanish Republic in the 1930s. In fact, among all forms of political Catholicism one finds throughout Europe and Latin America in the 1930s, only in Chile did a section of the Chilean Falange, led by Eduardo Frei and following the democratic principles of Jacques Maritain, make the transition from authoritarian "political Catholicism" to Christian Democracy before the Second World War. Some Catholic political movements in opposition to the Franco regime, particularly sections of the Catalan and Basque nationalist movements, adopted Christian Democracy after the war. But no major Christian Democratic party emerged out of the Spanish transition. Three separate Christian Democratic parties competed in the first general elections in 1977, but they failed to meet the minimum electoral threshold of 5 percent of the vote. Unable to gain parliamentary representation, none of the three parties survived the first post-Franco democratic elections. Apparently, Spain had missed the era of Christian Democracy. The Catholic parties of the 1930s were non-democratic and the democratic parties after the transition had become non-confessional.

At first, during the transition and immediately after, one could find politically engaged Catholics across the Spanish political spectrum from the extreme left to the extreme right. A genuine desire for religious peace after a protracted modern history of civil wars in which Catholicism itself had served as lightning rod; the realization that the Catholic community, the clergy



included, had become pluralistic politically and would not support any single Catholic party; the fear that any officially church-sponsored party could have become a minority party, thus undermining the church's claim that Catholicism was, at least sociologically, Spain's national religion—all these factors probably contributed to the church's choice to remain politically neutral during the transition. At the time, there seemed to be no major religious/secular cleavage and no Catholic electorate susceptible to political mobilization by the church, even if the church had been interested in political mobilization.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1990s, deep religious/secular cleavages reemerged in Spanish politics, particularly around "education" and "gender" issues. The Catholic hierarchy now allied itself openly with the conservative Partido Popular (PP), while the Socialist Party adopted a much more assertive "secularist," that is, laicist, position. But the dramatic secularization of Spanish society and the consolidation of democracy meant that the religious/secular cleavages led to significant political polarization and to "culture wars." However, those took place within a constitutional democratic framework which never endangered the democratic regime itself. Indeed, public opinion polls reveal unmistakably that an overwhelming majority of the Spanish population support not only the secularization of politics, but also the secularization of sexual mores. In this respect, the attempt to turn moral confessionalism around gender issues into a new basis for political mobilization served to mobilize a conservative Catholic base which became associated with the PP, but it could not revive mass political Catholicism and the PP did not become a confessional Catholic party.

According to the most comprehensive recent survey of Spanish religiosity, the 2008 Bertelsmann's Religion Monitor, two thirds (67 percent) of Spaniards claim that their religious beliefs have practically no influence on their political opinions, while less than one fifth (18 percent) claim that they have significant influence.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, while the survey reveals that there are significant gender and age differences on practically every aspect of Spanish religiosity, there are practically no gender and almost no age differences on this issue. Even among the self-defined highly religious, who constitute only 5 percent of the Spanish population, the proportion of those who claim that religion is important for their political opinions is almost the same (40 percent) as the proportion of those for whom their religious beliefs have no influence on their political opinions.

<sup>12</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions*, pp. 87–91.

<sup>13</sup> José Casanova, "Spanish Religiosity: An Interpretative Reading of the Religion Monitor Results for Spain," in *What the World Believes: Analyses and Commentary on the Religion Monitor 2008*, ed. Bertelsmann Stiftung (Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009), pp. 223–55.



Considering the almost obsessive emphasis that the official teachings of the Catholic hierarchy have recently placed on sexual and gender morality, even more striking is the clear separation, indeed the growing dissociation, between religion and sexual morality. Only 6 percent of Spaniards claim that religion is of great importance when it comes to sexuality, and only an additional 12 percent claim that religion has some influence on their sexuality. By contrast, a majority (51 percent) of Spaniards claim that religion has absolutely no influence upon their attitudes toward sexuality, while an additional 13 percent claim that it does not have very much influence. Thus, it would seem that Spanish sexual mores have become secularized and clearly differentiated from religious morality. It is significant that there is no gender gap on this issue, while there are still some differences between the three youngest cohorts and the two oldest ones on "gender" issues. Even among the self-defined highly religious, 26 percent claim that their religious beliefs have no influence upon their sexual attitudes, while only 41 percent claim that they wield significant influence. In fact, the figure is much lower than the proportion of religious people who claim that their religion influences their work and profession (58 percent) or their free time (53 percent).

Admittedly, since the 1970s, Spanish society has undergone a process of secularization more drastic perhaps than that of any other post-authoritarian Catholic society. Only Ireland has undergone a comparable process of drastic secularization in the wake not only of rapid economic modernization, but also as a consequence of the sexual abuse scandal.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, recent public opinion surveys show similar though less pronounced trends toward the separation of religion and politics, and most significantly toward the dissociation of religion and sexual morality in Latin American Catholic societies, such as Brazil or Mexico, which evince much less pronounced processes of secularization.<sup>15</sup>

Even in highly religious Catholic Poland, along with the "deconfessionalization" of the state, there has taken place a certain deconfessionalization of the nation with the recognition of internal ideological and cultural pluralism. Most significantly, there has been a pronounced liberalization and pluralization of moral norms in the public sphere, particularly with respect to sexual and gender norms as expressed in surveys of public opinion, in clear divergence from the official moral doctrines of the Catholic hierarchy (<<http://cbos.pl/EN/home/home.php>>).

<sup>14</sup> Malachi O'Doherty, *Empty Pulpits: Ireland's Retreat from Religion* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Soledad Loaeza, "Cultural Change in Mexico at the Turn of the Century: The Secularization of Women's Identity and the Erosion of the Authority of the Catholic Church," in *Religious Pluralism, Democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America*, ed. Frances Hagopian (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 96-130.



One can observe, indeed, a clear historical trend among Catholic democratic societies to pass legislation on family and gender issues, which goes against the publicly asserted official teachings of the church hierarchy, but is supported increasingly by public opinion and even by a majority of the self-defined Catholic population in those countries.<sup>16</sup> In discussing gender policies, however, as shown convincingly by Mala Htun in her study of state policies in the Southern Cone, it is important to disaggregate those policies since they tend to follow different dynamics.<sup>17</sup> Traditional family law influenced by Catholic teachings under the ancient regime, as well as modern civil laws influenced by the Napoleonic Code, had shared similar patriarchal principles of men's marital power (*puissance*), women's incapacity (*incapacité*), and *patria potestas*. It is important to recognize that changes in legal civil codes toward gender equality, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and have been spreading globally since the 1960s, have not been opposed by the Catholic Church. On the contrary, with the adoption of the modern discourse of human rights in the 1960s, Catholic doctrine has supported full legal equality for men and women in the family as well as in society. As the chapters in this volume show, this is probably the most significant divergence between contemporary Catholic and Muslim societies.

In this respect, one may assert that divisive gender issues had not yet emerged publicly during the transitions to democracy in Catholic countries in the 1970s. Indeed, the incipient women's movements were part of the general coalition of civil society movements against the various authoritarian regimes and, as such, also fell under the general public protection of civil society by the church.<sup>18</sup> No religious/secular cleavages had emerged yet around gender issues.

Cleavages around "gender" issues only emerged after democracy had been consolidated, once socialist and leftist parties began to introduce legislation legalizing divorce and the use of contraceptives against the adamant opposition of the Catholic Church.<sup>19</sup> Despite its resistance, however, the Catholic Church has been unable to resist the general trend toward liberalization of divorce laws and the state's promotion of the use of contraceptives as part of reproductive health policies in most Catholic countries. In a sense,

<sup>16</sup> Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon, "State Power, Religion, and Women's Rights: A Comparative Analysis of Family Law," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 18/1 (2011): 145–65.

<sup>17</sup> Mala Htun, *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce and the Family under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Mala Htun, "Life, Liberty, and Family Values: Church and State in the Struggle over Latin America's Social Agenda," in *Religious Pluralism, Democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America*, ed. Frances Hagopian (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), pp. 335–64.



developments in Italy foreshadowed what was to emerge later throughout the Catholic world. Divorce was first introduced in Italy in 1970. The Vatican and Catholic organizations began to mobilize for a referendum to abrogate the divorce law, but the Catholic coalition was soundly defeated in the 1974 Italian referendum.

In Spain, the ban on the sale of contraceptives was lifted in 1978, the same year in which the democratic constitution was approved in a referendum. In 1981, a divorce law was passed by the Chamber of Deputies with the support of thirty representatives from the ruling Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD), who broke ranks with the conservative party leadership. This was a year before the electoral victory of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) in October 1982. Brazil introduced a divorce law in 1977, still under an authoritarian regime. Argentina introduced a divorce law in 1987 under democratic President Alfonsín. In Ireland, the referendum of 1986 upheld the prohibition of divorce. But a decade later, in the 1995 referendum, the Irish electorate repealed the prohibition, despite the opposition of the Catholic Church. Even deeply Catholic Malta introduced divorce legislation following a referendum in 2011. As of today, every Catholic state in the world, with the exception of the Philippines and Vatican City, has passed some kind of divorce legislation, despite the resistance of the Catholic Church.<sup>20</sup> Yet even in the Philippines, arguably the most religious Catholic country in the world, the Catholic Church was unable to defeat the passage of the controversial 2013 Reproductive Health Law.<sup>21</sup>

The legalization of abortion in Catholic countries has followed a more complex and ambiguous path. In Spain, the PSOE introduced an abortion law in 1985 making induced abortion legal but restricted to the three cases of: serious risk to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman, rape, and malformations or defects in the fetus. The abortion law was liberalized further in 2010 under socialist Prime Minister Zapatero, basically allowing abortion on demand during the first trimester of pregnancy. In December 2012, the ruling conservative Popular Party, in close alliance with the Catholic Church, drafted a law to ban abortion except in cases of rape and serious health risks to the mother. But two years later, in September 2014, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy announced that the government was withdrawing the draft law due to lack of consensus within his own party in the face of massive popular opposition.

In Latin America, with the exception of the special cases of Cuba and Puerto Rico, only highly secular Uruguay passed an unrestricted law legalizing

<sup>20</sup> Htun and Weldon, "State Power."

<sup>21</sup> David T. Buckley, "Catholicism's Democratic Dilemma: Varieties of Public Religion in the Philippines," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62/2-3 (2014): 313-39; David T. Buckley, *Faithful to Secularism: The Religious Politics of Democracy in Ireland, Senegal, and the Philippines* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).



abortion in 2012. Some other Latin American countries (Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia) have passed more restrictive laws allowing abortion for health reasons. Most Latin American countries still ban abortion or permit it only in order to save the woman's life.<sup>22</sup>

In her comprehensive review of legislative changes on gender-related issues in Latin America, Mala Htun asks the poignant question: "Why were Latin American countries able to legalize divorce, adopt programs to prevent HIV/AIDS, and distribute contraceptives but not liberalize abortion and offer homosexuals greater rights?"<sup>23</sup> Latin American public opinion polls actually offer a plausible answer to this question, which is in line with Htun's own advice to disaggregate issues which, under a feminist liberal agenda, may appear as part and parcel of the same expansion of progressive women's and gender rights. People in Latin America seem to disaggregate and evaluate those issues differently, contradicting both feminist discourses, which tend to lump all of them together as positive developments enhancing women's rights, as well as Catholic moral doctrine, which also lumps them all together in the opposite direction as immoral practices.

The comprehensive 2014 Pew survey of Religion in Latin America, that includes social attitudes toward gender issues, clearly shows that the Latin American public tends to hold significantly different moral evaluations of divorce, contraception, sex outside of marriage, abortion, and same-sex marriage to those held by the church.<sup>24</sup> Only minorities of Catholics in most Latin American countries, from 10 percent in Chile to 39 percent in Peru, hold the opinion that divorce is morally wrong. Clearly, on this issue, a majority of Catholics disagree with the official teaching of the Catholic Church. Similarly, a majority of Catholics tend to accept the liberalization of sexual mores as a positive development. Those who hold that sex outside marriage is morally wrong have become minorities in most countries, from 17 percent in Uruguay to 45 percent in Mexico. Most strikingly, attitudes toward same-sex marriage are changing dramatically. In several Latin American countries the proportion of those who approve of same-sex marriage are already significantly larger than those against it: 62 percent vs 31 percent in Uruguay, 52 percent vs 40 percent in Argentina, 49 percent vs 43 percent in Mexico, 46 percent vs 42 percent in Chile. In Brazil, by contrast, the proportion of those who are against same-sex marriage is still slightly larger, 48 percent, than those who accept it, 45 percent. Most significantly, however, there is a growing generational gap and the younger generation, between 18 and 34 years old, tends to support same-sex marriage to a much larger extent than those who are

<sup>22</sup> Htun and Weldon, "State Power."

<sup>23</sup> Htun, "Life, Liberty," p. 351.

<sup>24</sup> Pew Research Center, "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region," November 13, 2014, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>> (accessed November 23, 2016), pp. 69–86.



35 years old or older: the gap is 75 percent vs 56 percent in Uruguay, 65 percent vs 44 percent in Argentina, 63 percent vs 38 percent in Mexico, and 56 percent vs 36 percent in Brazil.

By contrast, majorities of the Catholic population in every Latin American country, with the exception of Uruguay, maintain the view that abortion is morally wrong. In Uruguay, 49 percent of Catholics hold the view that abortion is morally wrong, although many of them clearly support the decriminalization of abortion. The proportion of Catholics who think that abortion is morally wrong is 57 percent in Chile, 64 percent in Argentina, and 71 percent in Mexico. In the rest of Latin America, those who consider that abortion is morally wrong is either over 80 percent or over 90 percent. Interestingly, women are almost as likely as men to say that abortion is morally unacceptable. Most significantly, younger Latin Americans are almost as likely as older Latin Americans to say that abortion is morally wrong.

Only in the case of abortion do Latin American Catholics tend to agree with the teaching of the Catholic hierarchy. On most other sexual moral and gender issues, Latin American Catholics tend to disagree with the official teachings of the Catholic Church, adopting an attitude that could be called "faithful dissent." They agree to disagree with the clerical hierarchy on this particular issue without assuming an attitude of sinful disobedience. They follow their own conscience in good faith. The Pew survey also shows that Protestants across Latin America maintain much more traditional or "fundamentalist" positions on gender and sexual norms.

The gender question is arguably the most serious and complex challenge facing the Catholic Church today.<sup>25</sup> One could argue that, until very recently, indeed until the arrival of Pope Francis, the response of the hierarchy had been mostly inadequate in so far as it tended to view and officially depict the very discourse on "gender" as a dangerous ideology produced by feminism, in the process turning feminism into an ideological foe, indeed into a specter not unlike communism in the nineteenth century. The modern moral principles of life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness are converging most dramatically throughout the world around issues of gender equality and sexual morality.

The "gender question" is, in many respects, the fundamental moral question of our times in the same way that "the social question" was the fundamental moral question from the middle of the nineteenth century. The Catholic Church, pressed by Catholic dynamics emerging from the grassroots of social Catholic movements, eventually developed a commendable track record of

<sup>25</sup> José Casanova, "The Contemporary Disjunction between Societal and Church Morality," in *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, ed. Charles Taylor, José Casanova, and George F. McLean (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), pp. 127-35.



addressing the social question. But regarding the gender question, the Catholic Church, at least the hierarchy and the *magisterium*, have mainly failed to address theologically the new challenge, contenting themselves with reaffirming traditional teachings which fail to come to terms with the radical social transformation and scrutinize prophetically the signs of the times.

The radical change in circumstances produced by the modern democratic and sexual revolutions, and the fundamental transformations in gender relations and gender roles which both entail, present particularly difficult challenges to the sacred claims of all religious traditions. Not surprisingly, the politics of gender and gender equality are central to politics everywhere and religion is thoroughly and intimately implicated in the politics of gender. Indeed, many analysts have been tempted to interpret what they view as the global emergence of religious "fundamentalism" in all religious traditions as primarily a patriarchal reaction against the common global threat of gender equality, the emancipation of women, and feminism.<sup>26</sup>

The discourses of feminism and secularism have become intertwined today in the same way that communism and atheism became intertwined in the nineteenth century. "Gender" has become, in this respect, the preeminently contested "social question," while "religion" has been thrown, willingly or unwillingly, into the vortex of the global contestation. Traditional religious establishments tend to view feminist agendas, and particularly the very notion of gender, as a historically contingent, socially constructed, and therefore changeable reality; as the greatest threat not only to their religious traditions and their moral authoritative claims, but to the very idea of a sacred or divinely ordained natural order, inscribed either in natural law, Shari'a, or some "right way" universally valid for all times.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church embraced theological developmental principles grounded in the historicity of divine revelation, incarnation, and continuous historical unfolding of the divine plans of salvation for humanity that require the church's careful discernment of "the signs of the times." The Catholic *aggiornamento* represented, in this respect, recognition of the fundamental moral principles of secular modernity. The human dignity of each and every person emerges as the guiding principle of the three most consequential documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Dignitatis Humanae*, and *Nostra Aetate*. All three documents share, moreover, the explicit reference to "the signs of the times" and the historicist recognition that we are entering a new age in the history of humanity with important repercussions for our understanding of the unfolding of the mystery of salvation.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).



Actually, the same historicist and developmental recognition appears most poignantly in the section directed to women in the closing speech of the Council, when Pope Paul VI asserted that:

at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation . . . The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. (<[http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_spe\\_19651208\\_epilogo-concilio-donne.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne.html)>)

Yet this prophetic vision of the unprecedented transformation in gender relations which humanity was experiencing did not have the transformative consequences one should have expected in the life of the church after the council.

Indeed, on issues of gender and sexual moral theology, the Catholic hierarchy, since the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, has reasserted a traditionalist ontological conception of human nature and of human biology based on the essentialist conception of an ahistorical, unchanging, and universally valid natural law. Such a traditional ontological conception is increasingly in tension with the historicist conception of human moral development upheld by the social sciences as well as with the conception of a changing biological-historical nature informed by the new evolutionary life sciences.

Confronted with the radical character of the gender and sexual revolution of the late sixties, the post-conciliar church seemed to be backpedaling and abandoning the historicist, prophetic, and forward-looking discernment of "the sign of the times," reverting to the defense of an unchanging and unchangeable tradition grounded in eternal and divine natural law. The issue here is not one of moral relativism, as a matter of arbitrary individual choice or preference, but that of the clash between fundamental "sacred" moral values. Theologically, any religious community has the right and the duty to uphold what it considers a divinely ordained sacred injunction or moral norm. Sociologically, however, the question is how long any religious tradition, particularly a "catholic" one, can resist the adoption of a new moral value when a near universal consensus concerning the sacred character of such a value emerges in society. To denounce modern moral developments as a reversion to paganism or rampant relativism is to misunderstand modern historical developments.

Sociologically, in reaction to the Catholic Church's official defense of a "traditionalist" position on gender issues and a singularly obsessive focus on "sexual" moral issues, one can observe throughout the Catholic world a dual process of female secularization and erosion of the church's authority on sexual morality. Perhaps for the first time in the accumulative waves of modern secularization women have left the church in large numbers, most dramatically throughout Europe, but increasingly also throughout North America and incipiently in Latin America. Female secularization is probably



the most significant factor in the drastic secularization of Western European societies since the 1960s<sup>27</sup> and in the radical rupture of European Christian "religion as a chain of memory".<sup>28</sup>

Equally crucial, and of grave societal relevance, is the drastic secularization of sexual morality. Increasing numbers of practicing Catholics are disobeying the injunctions of the Catholic hierarchy and following their own conscience on most issues related to sexual morality. Moreover, there is increasing evidence from public opinion polls in Europe, North America, and Latin America that young Catholic adults are explicitly dissociating their sexuality and their religiosity, claiming that religion has absolutely no influence upon their attitudes toward sexuality.

We are witnessing, on the one hand, a church hierarchy which evinces an almost obsessive focus in defending traditional sexual morality, and, on the other, a majority of Catholic faithful in the secular world who not only ignore the moral injunctions of the hierarchy, but feel increasingly comfortable dissociating their religion and their sexuality. One must wonder how far this radical dissociation of private sexuality from religion and even from morality can go and where it may lead. In my view, it is leading to a radical secularization of the private sphere of individual consciousness that parallels the secularization of politics and of the public sphere.

But suddenly, the unexpected election of Pope Francis changed dramatically the nature of the debate, the official discourse coming from the hierarchy, and what appeared to be an acrimonious and growing disjunction between church and secular world on issues of gender. His election brought a surprising sense of renewal and hope to the Catholic Church. Most encouraging and welcome was the change in tone from an inward and institutionally self-absorbed preoccupation with a self-referential church to one of concern and service for every person, with a preferential option for the poor and needy, embracing all of humanity, believers and non-believers.

From the start, Francis has found it natural to speak *urbi et orbi*, to the city and to the globe, in a direct and unassuming language that everyone can understand and appreciate. Equally important has been what was left unsaid. For a long time there was no mention of any of the issues that, for several years if not decades, had been at the center of magisterial and episcopal pronouncements and which served to define Catholic moral confessionalism to insiders and outsiders. There was no mention of contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage, and related gender issues, no critical mention of feminism, the ideology of gender, or the culture of death.

<sup>27</sup> Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization, 1800–2000* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).



The pope himself has repeatedly mentioned that one should not expect any change in doctrine or teaching from his pontificate. But the change in tone, the relegation of issues of gender and sexual morality from the core to the periphery of church teaching, and the foregrounding of the Sermon on the Mount were in themselves most relevant. A temporary moratorium, for the time being at least, on very divisive sexual and gender moral issues actually served as a welcome respite.

But issues of gender are not going to go away, and the growing gap between church and secular morality on sex and gender will need to be addressed eventually, hopefully in a new spirit and with a new tone. A renewed Catholic Church less self-absorbed in its own clericalism and embracing the poorest and the weakest must perforce pay greater attention to women, who remain the poorest, the weakest, and the least respected peoples in every society and every organization, including "the People of God."

The convocation of the Synod on the Family has finally begun the process and the possibility that the church, the entire People of God, may discern, critically and faithfully, the various aspects of the profound gender revolution is one of the most dramatic in the whole history of humanity. The process began actually with a call to the bishops to discover the sense of the faithful, of Catholics the world over, on issues related to marriage and the family. The synod itself began with the papal insistence on real frank debate with a spirit of authentic readiness to listen to each other, reopening the conciliar dynamics of catholicity. What the frank debates actually evinced was that the Catholic Church is deeply divided on those issues and that much more open conversation, debate, and dialogue at all levels of the church will be necessary to discern which elements of the moral teachings on gender are essential, so on which there can be no disunity; which within the hierarchy of truths are disciplinary and thus left better to the discernment of the local churches; and which should be left to the moral responsibility of the individual conscience.

But above all, what the papacy of Francis has made amply evident is that the Catholic Church throughout the Global South continues to be actively engaged in movements for social justice and peace, in defense of the rights and the human dignity of immigrants and refugees, of landless peasants and indigenous people, of the jobless and the underemployed, and in ecological movements for sustainable development and to protect our common home, the Earth. The Church of Francis continues to be, in many respects, "the voice of the voiceless," accompanying all those on the margins and the peripheries who are the victims of hegemonic processes of globalization. A global Catholic Church in our global age has found its mission in helping global humanity move, in the words of Pope Francis, "from a globalization of indifference to a globalization of fraternity."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2014), p. 310–11.



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