

# Religion and the Public Sphere: The Indisponible Niche of Political Theology in the Philippines

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**Abstract.** Arguments on the role of religion in the public sphere have been recently polemical. The apparent intermittent fading and resurgence of religion in the international (political) arena gave rise to the quandary of the place and extent of its theological engagement. In Habermas's premise, the public sphere of a democratic society must be open to all, pave the avenue for an imperative inclusion and exigent justification of religion's role and involvement. As Craig Calhoun puts it: "...we endanger the future of the democratic polity if we cannot integrate [religion] into the workings of public reason." The emergence of a reasoned public sphere is a response to the perplexing influence of religion and the political conflicts it bears. This paper attempts to elucidate the indisponible place and role of religion in the Philippines' public sphere - the recognition of the force of religion as a bipolar vehicle in remediating or exacerbating social-political conflicts and fostering or hindering socioeconomic development.

**Keywords:** Political Theology, Public Sphere, Homeostatic Politics, Church and State

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. "Is God really back?" The Apparent Resurgence and the Perplexity it Causes

Adrian Ivakhiv (2009) cited in his article entitled *Religious (Re-)Turns in the Wake of Global Nature: Toward a Cosmopolitics*, he exclaims that "God is Back!" (p.213). But in the context of the history of the Philippines, to that I asked, "Have He really been gone?" Although the apparent demise has been prompted and prematurely announced by secular theorists and modern intellectuals, there is certain resurgence in the theological theme. Whatever the case with religion itself, what is less deniable is that there has been a religious turn among philosophers and social scientists, including some of the most prominent intellectuals of our time, from Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas to Charles Taylor, just to name a few. Habermas' premise that the public sphere of a democratic society must be open to all (Calhoun, 1992), pave the avenue for an imperative inclusion and exigent justification of religion's role and involvement.

Religion is inspiring, consoling, persuading, provocative, [even] threatening, a matter of reassuring, or calls to put one's life online, as Craig Calhoun (2011, p.118) stated it. It is a way to make peace and a reason to make war. Religion is a dipolar vehicle. As the great Iranian sociologist and Islamic reformer Ali Shariati (1986) defined religion as "an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in people's lives. It can destroy or revitalize, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt." (p.48). No wonder debates about religion in the public sphere can be so confusing. The extent of its jurisdiction and involvement is rubrically vague and, consequentially, perplexes the public. The enquiries of this paper, then, are as follows: *What is the role of religion in the public sphere? And what ought to be our conduct in the rapprochement of these spheres?* This paper attempts to elucidate (probe) the indisponible<sup>1</sup> place and role of religion in the Philippines' public sphere. It also proposes a constructive response or rapprochement in the engagement of religion in the public arena. In ascertaining the niche and role of religion, the author uses a philosophical research methodology. It employs a critical analysis of the phenomenon, and a novel and reflective reformulation of concepts.

Suddenly, we have God-talk again in the air, albeit non-strictly.

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<sup>1</sup> Indisponible appertains to two (2) relevant definitions (a) [common] unavailable, (b) [droit|legal] inalienable. The paradoxical translation was derivative from the original French word disponibilite.

Religion has never been dormant in the Philippine public arena. We are a country with a predominantly Roman Catholic populace and an un-dismissible historical influence of the Spanish ecclesiastical colonizers. Of which during that time, the church and state possess homologous seat of power in the public sphere. Hence, both have never wavered in their engagement; however, serious political entanglement between the church and state has been polemical.

## 2. The Impregnable Wall, The Metaphor, The Problem

It is not uncommon every time a recalcitrant mob or a militant separationists/activists crowd bellows these crude questions: *why is it that, every now and then, religious officials poke their noses in apparently every government affair or civic issue that concerns the public? Why don't they just mind their own business?* (Sorry, actually, this is their business!) It disheartens some of us. It annoys some of us of the sheer naiveté of the nameless mob. But they stood for their point. And their ultimate defense, boils down to a one liner statement, **Section 6 Article II of the 1987 Constitution**, the most abused, misconstrued, sensationalized, and haphazardly cited: **the inviolability of the separation of church and state** - a wall which has been interpreted to mean the (absolute) separation and even hostility between the two entities (Coquia, 2006).

*In toto:*

*The Separation of Church and State shall be inviolable.*

### 2.1. Art II, Section 6, 1987 Constitution

*No law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever be allowed. No religious test shall be required for the exercise of political rights.*

### 2.2. Art. III, Section 5, 1987 Constitution (Non-Establishment Clause)

*Religious denominations and sects shall not be registered (as a political party, organization or coalition, by the Comelec)*

### 2.3. Art. IX, C, Section 2(5)

*One-half of the seats allocated to the party-list representatives shall be filled, as provided by law, by selection or election from labor, peasant, urban poor, indigenous cultural communities, women, youth, and such other sectors as may be provided by law, **except the religious sector.***

### 2.4. Art. VI, Section 5(2).

The early American missionaries in the Philippines stressed out this wall to overcome the predominance of Catholicism (Coquia, 2006). The metaphorical wall of separation of church and state seeks to capture the idea that there exists the sphere of religion, the sphere of the state, and a mighty unassailable wall protecting each from the other (Carter, 2000). Hence, questions arise, *what are the specifications of this wall?* Is the “wall” like a public *Desmosome*, that adhered the two spheres and serve as their junction; or is it a “wall of indifference and independence” to the other domain. It draws us to reflect on the nature of the inter-spherical relation. Officially speaking, it’s impregnable, but realistically, the wall has been vague and arbitrary, supple and relative. Separationists contend a “strict separation”, because they do not agree among themselves on the nature of the problem or how to resolve it. However, separationists assert that the church should limit their right to air religious doctrines and that the state should not favor any religious lobbying. This is also a sort of an appeal to *neutrality*, particularly to the predominance and influence of the Roman Catholic Church. “The point of state neutrality,” Taylor (2007) writes, “is precisely to avoid favoring or disfavoring not just religious positions, but any basic position, religious or nonreligious.” However, this is not the case in the Philippines. As Fr. Ranhilio Aquino (2011) said that “laïcité is an imperative of justice.” Secularism, as expressed in the principle of separation of church and state, is necessary to maintain a free society. However, because the majority of the population in the Philippines is Roman Catholic, it is inevitable for society to be judging things from the Christian perspective. Even though how much separationists’ insist on the wall, no true wall of separation is possible. Religion and the state, the two great sources of control all through human history, will never be fully separate from each other. Each will always shade into the other’s sphere. Hence, does it imply the necessity of religion in the public sphere?

St. Thomas, on *De Regimine Principum*, stresses authority in civil society must have in view the public good; if it loses sight of this, it becomes unjust, anti-social, and tyrannical. Tyrannical authority is held in

check by the authority of the Church, which provides for the spiritual welfare of all the faithful, and has the power, at least in the case of the apostasy of the tyrant, to absolve his subjects from obedience on the ground that the ruler is an apostate (chap.1, p.1). On the other hand, secularism firmly stands that the public sphere must be strictly secular. Albeit, strict secularists insist that religion is (and must be) concerned only in the “salvation of souls and safeguarding morals”. It has put religious freedom and diversity on a collision course with the strictly political decisions (may it be juridical or legislative). However, both domains are increasing their spheres. If the public sphere must be secular, then an expanding public sphere implies a shrinking sphere for religion, religious diversity, and religious powers. Suddenly, religion becomes a square circle, unfit to the public. This rigorous separation of the religious and secular spheres simply is not the world in which most Filipinos live nor would many people want to. So although secularists and separationists insist the limitation of religion and its inhibition to the public sphere, it is not realistic, at the least, in the Philippine context. The Filipinos can never dissociate the public sphere from religious expression. A man’s social nature and the pursuit of the ends of man are necessarily in the context of a community adhering to its moral duties to God and to men. Indubitably, there is a significant role religion plays in the shaping of the public sphere. We need to accept and configure this square circle. There is an appeal at hand to recognize and open a door, but not to tear down the wall. There is a call to accommodate religious engagement in the public sphere. It is the demand to seek the niche, i.e., an appropriate place for religion in the public square. One could not simply reject the influence of religion but at the same time the wall is still a necessity, although it is metaphorical. Demarcating politics and religion is an exigent expediency favorable for modern society. The separation establishes the authority, autonomy and credibility of the other aspects. However, religion is inalienable from the public sphere. Then, if it is in-disposable, the only apparent deficit would be the “rules of engagement”. Hence, *what is its role?* The question addressed on the clear role (involvement) of religion (or religious claims) is an aspect for the reanalyzing, refiguring, and renewal of the public sphere.

### 3. The Homeostatic Role

*What really is its role in the public sphere?* The public square|sphere<sup>2</sup> could not be extracted and treated as “naked”, as Neuhaus (1984) coined it, devoid of the influences of politics and religion. For the public is inherently a colloidal mixture of the aspects of the society which functions distinctively, but, promotes the integrity of the society, holistically and in one direction – progress and general welfare. In fact, Neuhaus thought that a purely public sphere stripped of religion is an impossibility; for there could be no such thing as engaged democratic public life that did not depend on and connect to citizens’ deeper moral commitments. Indeed, Habermas was adamant when he stressed out that finding ways to integrate religion into the public sphere is a vital challenge for contemporary society (Calhoun, 1992). Justifying its niche is the bigger problem.

Habermas’ arguments leave that the call to recognize explicitly religious voices in the public sphere is at least partially instrumental – a call to include ideas because they are useful while implicitly doubting that they may be true. Like Habermas, Taylor is concerned with identifying ways in which the public sphere can help to produce greater integration among citizens who enter public discourse with different views. Habermas stresses agreement and clearer knowledge while Taylor, in his *A Secular Age*, (2007) emphasized mutual recognition and collaboration in common pursuits. But both see excluding religion from the public sphere as undermining the solidarity and creativity they seek.

The recognition of the force of religion as a bipolar vehicle in remediating or exacerbating social-political conflicts and fostering or hindering socioeconomic development is also the ground for the homeostatic property of religion in the public sphere. Concurring to Habermas and Taylor’s, allow me to use a novel concept in the treatment of religion in the public sphere as an exigent aspect in maintaining the integrity of the society and in facing the changes of the time. This is the concept of “homeostasis”. Homeostasis is the property of a system that regulates its environment and tends to maintain stable, constant condition of properties like, blood pressure, temperature or pH. It is typically used to refer to the equilibrium and harmony of elements in a living organism. The concept came from that milieu interieur as created by Claud Bernard (Cannon, 1926). Multiple dynamic equilibrium adjustment and regulation mechanism make

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<sup>2</sup>Jürgen Habermas’s classic book, to which we owe today’s commonplace usage of the term public sphere, is an influential case in point. Habermas offered a genealogy in which the eighteenth-century literary public sphere informed the development of a public sphere of rational-critical debate that gave individuals in civil society a way to influence politics. He generally ignored religion in his historical account of the public sphere, as he has acknowledged. And, until recently, religion did not figure in his further considerations on communicative action and the organization of modern society.

homeostasis possible. It uses **negative feedback** system to maintain its functional level, such as in maintaining blood pressure, it releases hormones to either increase or decrease pressure on the vessels just to meet its functional normal value. **Positive feedback**, on the other hand, is used to compensate to a demand, increasing or decreasing resources beyond its normal value to answer an exigent need (e.g., proliferation of platelets in the wound location). Homeostasis keeps the balance and at the same time uses resources in coping with the changes in its milieu to make sure that the entire being (society) is in route to its wellbeing (welfare) and progress. The homeostatic effect of religion, with regard to its negative feedback, is to safeguard the masses from political bigotry and bureaucratic indifference. It awakens us from our apathetic social slumber! Religion must play as an arbiter to policy, acting as vanguards against political exploitation, i.e., regulate the minority conservative politicians from making the public sphere as an avenue for justifying private truths guised as public claims. It is also through negative feedback that religion preserves moral integrity of the society; such as progressive stances to impede immoral (potentially immoral) provisions, proactive positions that undermine ethical standards, and emphasis on social responsibility in meeting the good of the state. A narrow synonymous conception is the check-and-balance principle. Albeit, the role of religion is not naively to “police” but to actively participate in restoring the public’s integrity. This must not be misconstrued as an ulterior act to shift powers but to normalize the value, so to speak.

There is also a necessity to use positive feedback (beyond their conventional function/value) to meet the demands of the emerging theory of a reasoned (informed) public sphere. Much thinking about the public sphere was devoted not simply to ensuring openness but to disciplining participants so that conviction would not eliminate the capacity to entertain contrary views and faith would not become “enthusiasm”— the determination to act immediately on inspiration without the mediation of reflection or reason (Calhoun, 2011). Instruction however is important, instead of the propaganda. To inform the public of the implications of the provisions and potential decisions in the general public life. Religious thinkers have often held that public reason is not only an arbiter of policy decisions but also a vital means for advancing all sorts of understanding, even of religious convictions and their implications. They go beyond their religious vests and hobbits to walk out of the naïve convention of fostering only salvific functions, e.g. liberation theology, preferential option for the poor, and curbing political corruption and preservation of other ethical standards of socio-political issues. They expand their sphere and endeavor to meet the demands of the post-modern society in light of an integral and renewed faith: to educate the public, technologically compete, and socially cope.

Although, when we say equilibrium it connotes a total balance of elements. But in homeostasis, there is still a possibility of an imbalance homeostasis. *How?* In meeting the demand for, it may exert or exhaust too much of its resources (reason) and in the process aggravates more the situation than resolving it, creating a more imbalance state. Hence, religion may (potentially) still be in awry, only in the abuse of its jurisdiction. However, public decisions must be made by arguments that are public in character. It must be free from political lobbyists and religious persecutionists of their undue influence in decision making. The insistence of the influence of political theology must not be overdone to the point of controlling, impeding or jeopardizing the political legislations or juridical procedures. Only in this point, that religion goes overboard its boundary. When religion succumbs itself so much in its role in the public sphere, to the point of abuse, persecution, unreasonable incorrigible public demands and coercive insistence just to maintain its *status quo*, impede a political decision, or attain a political overhand; it loses sight of its divine role. For example, those advocates of the recent RH Bill whose arguments fall on a *slippery slope* and *hasty generalization* fallacies. It must not lose its direction and conviction, but monitor its potential arrogance and false motivation. One thing I noticed about religion in the contemporary society is that the more it imposes its “power” in the public sphere; the more it loses it. But if one tries to inform the public reasonably and empower them, then you are also empowered. That is why religion is necessary in the creation of an integrative public reason, and reflexively regulates itself. Religious and nonreligious citizens meet as equals, and religious ideas inform the public sphere through argument rather than through simply dissemination (let alone top-down authority), coercion or apostatic blackmailing.

#### 4. Synergy and the Reasoned Public Sphere

As Craig Calhoun (2011) puts it: “...we endanger the future of the democratic polity if we cannot integrate [religion] into the workings of public reason” (p.120). The emergence of a reasoned public sphere is a response to the perplexing influence of religion and the political conflicts it bears. But much more

important for democratic societies is exploring ways to work for common goals – like liberty, equality, and fraternity. Further he states:

*Constructing a democratic life together may depend more on being able to engage in such shared positive pursuits than on any institutional arrangement (or, indeed, agreement on all the reasons to engage in common pursuits). This also suggests that we should not understand the public sphere entirely in terms of argumentation about the truth value of propositions. It is a realm of creativity and social imaginaries in which citizens give shared form to their lives together, a realm of exploration, experiment, and partial agreements. Citizens need to find ways to treat each other's basic commitments with respect; fortunately they are also likely to find considerable overlaps in what they value. Like Habermas, Taylor is concerned with identifying ways in which the public sphere can help to produce greater integration among citizens who enter public discourse with different views. Habermas stresses agreement and clearer knowledge while Taylor stresses mutual recognition and collaboration in common pursuits (Calhoun, 1992, p.129).*

This collaborative effort is what we call synergy. It is not toleration or mere homogeneity. It does not imply a dissolved unity of variables but a distinct aspects functioning differently and interdependently in the achievement of one common goal or pursuit. The wall is still there as well as the junction between them. The contemporary era is the time wherein reasoned public sphere has an exigency in order for the public to participate in societal|political affairs. The society integrates all the aspects and in turn must decide on that. *A democracy that believes in religious freedom should be willing to live with the tension; so should a religion that believes in democracy - Stephen L. Carter*

## 5. Conclusion

Religion is indisponible in the public sphere in two senses: (a) the confusing *role* and the seeming death of the *demarcation* of the role of religion in the Philippines; and (b) the inalienability of this role/influence. Religion in the Philippines cannot be simply dismissed, especially with its 300 years of influence rooted in almost all facets of the public sphere. The role of religion in the public sphere is to defend the moral integrity of the society through a reasoned public sphere. Nevertheless, the fulfillment of a reasoned public sphere can only be achieved with the collaborative involvement of its members.

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