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The Role of Religion in Politics: The Analytical Category of the Social Public Sphere[1]

Siyasette Dinin Rolü: Bir Analitik Kategori Olarak Toplumsal Kamusal Alan

Abstract

Within the realm of political theory, the existing republican and liberal theories of the public sphere have not been normatively and practically sufficient for Muslim-majority contexts. Few prominent scholars such as Jürgen Habermas have provided a revitalised approach to the discussions of religion in the public sphere, enabling an expansion of the artificial and controversial boundaries between the private and the public as well as the religious and the political. In his publications since the mid-2000s, Habermas has proposed the notions of 'post-secularism,' 'religious tolerance,' and the 'modernization of religious consciousness' and he significantly articulated new divisions for an 'informal public sphere' and an 'institutional public sphere.' In this article, I re-appropriate some of Habermas' ideas to theorise about the analytically differentiated categories of *social public sphere*—a distinct form of a political public sphere where religious communal life is organised by civil society associations—and *state public sphere*—where the secular state controls the common institutional framework. The paper offers a more nuanced view of the relationship between religion and the public sphere as a way of reconciling political secularism and public religious presence that would help democratic consolidation in the Muslim world.

Keywords: Public sphere, religion, secularism, political theory, Jürgen Habermas.

JEL Codes: N30, N40

Özet

Siyaset teorisi alanında kamusal alana ilişkin mevcut cumhuriyetçi ve liberal teoriler, çoğunluğu Müslüman olan bağlamlar için normatif ve pratik anlamda yetersiz kalmaktadır. Jürgen Habermas gibi az sayıda seçkin teorisyen, kamusal alanda din tartışmalarını yeniden ele alarak, özel ile kamusal ve dini ile siyasi sınırlar arasındaki yapay tartışmaların genişlemesini mümkün kılmıştır. 2000'lerin ortalarından bu yana, Habermas 'post-sekülerizm', 'dini hoşgörü' ve 'dini bilincin modernizasyonu' gibi kavramları ortaya koymuş ve 'informal' ve 'kurumsal' kamusal alan' ayrımının önemini dile getirmiştir. Bu makale dini kollektif yaşamın sivil toplum dernekleri tarafından organize edildiği bir siyasi kamusal alan biçimi olarak *sosyal kamusal alan* ile laik devletin ortak kurumsal çerçeveyi kontrol ettiği yer olan *devlet kamusal alanı arasında* analitik bir ayrım yapmakta ve bunu kuramsallaştırmaktadır. Böylece siyasi laiklik ve dinin kamusal alandaki varlığının uzlaştırılmasının

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demokratikleşmeye sağlayacağı katkıyı din ile kamusal alandaki ilişkiye daha sofistike bir bakış sunarak irdelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kamusal alan, din, laiklik, siyaset teorisi, Jürgen Habermas.

JEL Kodları: N30, N40

Introduction

Habermas and the New Conceptualisations of a Democratic Public Sphere

The existing republican and liberal theories have overlooked the role of religion in the public sphere. Even liberal constitutionalism, despite its appeal of accommodating diversity and promoting pluralism, has incorporated religion only as a force to "be tolerated, but that cannot claim to provid[e] a cultural resource for the self-understanding of any truly modern mind" (Habermas, 2008: 26). Yet since the 2000s, when there were efforts to bring back religion once again to the heart of political theory, this pattern slightly changed, with reforming voices appearing within the liberal and republican traditions themselves. Charles Taylor's (2011, 2014) 'liberal-democratic secularism,', Ayelet Shachar's (2001) 'transformative accommodation,' and William E. Connoloy's (1999) 'critical liberalism' are prominent examples that moved away from the conventional idea of religion being a private matter to it becoming central to understanding public demands. These more enlightened models will be incorporated in the process of synthesisation and reorientation of the existing theories and will conceptualise a new framework on the social public sphere. Hitherto, this paper will more specifically focus on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas (2006), who has also refashioned his opinion on the public role of religion in his latest publications stimulating more informed and nuanced approaches to the debate.

Habermas (2008: 20) has recognised the political significance of religion in providing moral motivation for action and shaping collective lives. He has also recognised that the liberal ambition to keep religion outside political life inflicts disadvantage and injustice to people with religious normative systems. Certain themes emerged in Habermas' more recent writings that revitalised the rethinking on the public sphere through the articulation of open and inclusive secularism, democratic tolerance and pluralism, and religious participation in an open-ended deliberative procedure. Thus, Habermas' theorisation of 'post-secularism,' 'religious tolerance,' the 'modernization of religious consciousness,' and the relationship between the 'informal public sphere' and the 'institutional public sphere' are significant contributions in political theory that allow the rethinking of the role of religion in politics.

When it comes to secularism, Connolly (1999: 19), similar to Habermas, maintains that "secularism needs refashioning, not elimination." Proposing the concept of 'post-secularism,' Habermas (2006; 2008) expands the range of secularism by reassessing his earlier stance that religious identities should be appropriated at the threshold of a secular public sphere. Instead, the new concept underlines the necessity to reconsider secularism and go beyond the public sphere models of the secular states of the past towards more pluralistic ends. With post-secularism, Habermas still recognises that secularism, as a political and a thin moral good, is the epistemic foundation of liberal democracies. Yet, he describes a revised recognition of the important role that religion plays in public life, thus articulating an enhanced idea of secularism that is inclusive of religious voices and needs.

Accordingly, in his more recent works, Habermas criticises the artificially constructed partition of the public and the private, in which public participation necessitates citizens to abandon their religious convictions and leave them to the realm of the private. The difficulty, he warns, is that "many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons" (Habermas, 2006: 8). Habermas (2008: 10) also acknowledges religion's provision of some "key resources for the creation of meaning and identity" that are essential for developing personal autonomy, self-respect, and individual good. Thus, deterring religious people from politically experiencing their worldviews, demands, and needs, in fact inflicts serious disadvantages on their self-esteem and substantially diminishes the quality of life they experience and in return the probability of their civic participation. As such, Habermas asks for the political inclusion of religious arguments to the public sphere of Western democracies.

Yet Habermas is also aware of the potential risk of religion in raising itself into a public power and becoming a divisive force within the public sphere. In order to maintain the secular and impartial nature of state institutions and preserve the social fabric while recognising the public role of religion, Habermas (2006: 9) therefore emphasises setting a line between the 'informal public sphere,' where religious comprehensive doctrines can have unrestricted room for deliberation, and the 'institutional public sphere,' where only secular reason can have institutional influences. The informal public sphere "can be best described as a network for communicating information and points of view" where deliberation takes place in informal instances and social will formation (Habermas, 1996: 360). Yet these "[c]ommutative fluxes and public influences" and policy advocacy in the informal public sphere can be changed into a matter for deliberation in a formal, institutionalised public sphere only if they are translated into a secular language (Lubenow, 2012: 63). In other words, in order for religious arguments to have an institutional representation, they have to fulfil "the institutional translation requirement" if they are to be debated and won within the boundaries of secular public reason (Habermas, 2006: 15). This is essentially subjecting comprehensive doctrines to a rational inquiry for them to be part of parliamentary debates, public policy- and law-making, and administrational authority. To address the rational and institutional translation process of religious language, Habermas (2006: 14) introduced the idea of the "modernization of religious consciousness" towards what he calls as 'religious toleration' or what at times referred to as "pluralization of diverging universes of discourse" (Habermas 1998: 403).

In Habermas' post-secular paradigm, religious toleration represents the normative foundation of liberal democratic coexistence within the public sphere. Habermas (2004: 12) asserts that the civic "inclusion of religious minorities in the political community" and "the acceptance of the voluntary character of religious association" are to be recognised by the secular democratic state. This would amount to opening up democratic spaces for other comprehensive moral and political doctrines as opposed to laicism's imposition of the state's comprehensive conception of the good over the diverse citizenry. Yet for this recognition to happen, religious individuals and groups are also expected to "be tolerant," internalising the equal civic and political rights and liberties of other members of the political community (Habermas, 2004: 11). According to Habermas:

> Tolerance means that believers of one faith, of a different faith and non-believers, must mutually concede to one another the right to those convictions, practices and ways of living that they themselves reject (2008: 7).

Under the religious tolerance idea, the burden of translating religious into 'rational' reason is also shared by secular citizens. Secular citizens are expected to engage in the active process of understanding religious beliefs, needs, and demands in the informal public sphere. They should also leave behind possible existing prejudices and instead acknowledge that religious argumentations may enclose rational lines (Habermas, 2006: 19). Effectively, religious tolerance does not only involve a mutual expectation for respect, but also upholds platforms for public deliberation and dynamic forms of civic dialogue. In Habermas' own words:

> The other side of religious freedom is, in fact, a pacification of the pluralism of worldviews that distribute burdens unequally. To date, only citizens committed to religious beliefs are required to split their identities, as it were, into their public and private elements…. But only if the secular side, too, remains sensitive to the force of articulation inherent in religious languages will the search for reasons that aim at universal acceptability not lead to an unfair exclusion of religions from the public sphere, nor sever secular society from important resources of meaning (2003: 109).

In essence, what the Habermasian terms of "cooperative cognitive effort" and "complementary learning processes" signal is an active search for a reciprocal and reflective relationship of living together, or a more dialogical interaction and normative synergy between religious and secular citizens (Habermas, 2006: 15, 18). These ideas also seek to establish genuine dialogue to foster a new era of cooperation and mutual respect, in which post-secularism promotes the equal treatment of all religious, cultural, and ideological communities by overcoming laicism's hostility to religious and cultural ways of life.

Although Habermas writes within the secular European contexts where the main religion is Christianity, with Islam being mostly related to immigration issues these days, his ideas are crucial for rethinking the relationship between secularism and religion under the public sphere elsewhere. However, this could only be successfully done if it included

a rigorous reinterpretation and reconfiguration of concepts such as secularism, religious modernisation, tolerance, and institutional arrangement in relation to the public sphere of the specific contexts under examination, which are socially and normatively different than the ones Habermas was writing in and referring to.

In this article, I undertake such an endeavour with relation to Muslim-majority societies. To address the question of what kind of public sphere could render the greatest potential for democratic consolidation in Muslim-majority societies where religion has a strong societal, organisational, and political claim, I will reorient the ideas introduced by Habermas and formulate new terms to develop a distinct theory of public sphere in Muslim-majority contexts. To do so, I will combine the ideas of thinkers from different genres of political theory, multiculturalism, liberalism, and Muslim political thought in order to articulate the analytically differentiated categories of social public sphere—a distinct form of a political public sphere where religious communal life is organised by civil society associations—and state public sphere—where the secular state controls the common institutional framework. I dedicate time to comprehensively develop the idea of social public sphere in order to understand its complexities by closely examining two categories: (a) democratic toleration and (b) institutional pluralism. By doing so, the ultimate aim of the paper is to offer a more nuanced view of the relationship between religion and the public sphere as a way of reconciling political secularism and public religious presence that would help the development of democratic public sphere in Muslim societies, strengthening normative and practical commitments to democracy in these settings.

1. The Analytical Category of the Social Public Sphere

The significant role of the public sphere in a successful implementation of a democratic regime is beyond dispute, as a public sphere that is independent of the state is necessary to cultivate democracy (Habermas, 1964: 52-53; Eickleman and Salvatore, 2002: 99). Historically, the emergence of the modern public sphere has been related to the rise of independent rational thought. The Enlightenment idea that humans can use their own reason and free will in the pursuit of knowledge and morality, which are not preordained by a divine rule, has thus been crucial to the development of the idea of the (secular and scientific) public sphere. Yet unlike in the Western world, in the Muslim world the authority of the divine revelation has not been deeply destabilised and thus the emergence of a public sphere as per its evolution in Western democracies is thought to be next to impossible in predominantly Muslim contexts. Ernest Gellner (1992; 1997) like many other orientalists has viewed Islam as an all-pervasive comprehensive doctrine that lacks a political culture of compromise and institutions between the state and the individual, and considered this as the primary cause impeding the way to democratic public sphere; hence, democratisation.

However, anti-essentialist arguments raised by thinkers such as Esposito (1992) and Kramer (1993) identified that democratic hindrance is not a product of an incompatibility between democratic political culture and Islam. If many Muslim societies have never followed a life under a democratic public sphere, it is mainly "allied to structural factors" within their respective political systems rather than religious belief systems (Volpi, 2004:

1062). A strong, all-pervasive, and authoritarian political establishment has undercut the establishment of a democratically tolerating political environment. The ruling elite have often subjugated public opinion and dictated the common good. Even in societies like Turkey, Jordan, and Morocco, which have experienced a relatively free public sphere, not all groups have been allowed equal access to public debate and not everyone's legal rights have been equally protected. In most cases, the partial democratic change has been "part of an attempt to channel political participation into a discrete, state-delineated political space" rather than a free public space that cultivates democratic communication and deliberates established political norms (Wiktorowicz, 1999: 606).

Consequently, for understanding the conditions in which Muslim democracy could be rendered a genuine possibility, the rethinking of the public sphere is *sine qua non*. The existing republican and liberal theories of the public sphere were not normatively and operationally sufficient for Muslim-majority contexts. Scholars like Habermas have provided the impetus for the development of alternative conceptions of the public sphere, enabling an expansion of the artificial boundaries between the private and the public. This paper takes this task further by arguing in favour of new divisions for state authority and political–institutional organisation, reworking the boundaries between the state and the public sphere through political theory, which has traditionally neglected this division. In particular, the new concept put forth here of the 'social public sphere,' as distinct from a state public sphere, aims to recognise the communal role of religion more effectively than the liberal and republican models while upholding individual rights and safeguarding the prospect of political and ideological dissent as successfully as the liberal models.

2. The Differentiation between the State Public Sphere and the Social Public Sphere

A constructivist direction for conceptualising state–civil society relations asserts that "states are not the sort of abstract, formal objects which readily lend themselves to clear-cut, unambiguous definition" (Jessop, 1990: 340). State–society relations are "blurred, constantly reshaped by actors, and by no means well-defined" (Shahar, 2008: 420). This "valuable new [constructivist] direction for theorizing the state and state-society relations" can potentially inspire new understandings on state–civil society relations, going beyond the universalist secularism that strictly controls public life (Shahar, 2008: 432). On this subject, the work of scholars like Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im reveal "the illegitimacy of drawing sharp ontological distinctions between 'the political' and 'the social'" problematising the universalist and hegemonic models of the public sphere (Cook et al., 2016: 6).

In the republican and liberal models, the state and the public sphere come together and both are seen as belonging to the realm of the political. In these frameworks, decoupling the state and the public sphere from religion is thought to be the way to maintain neutrality (Habermas, 1989: 3). Thus, identities, goods, demands, and needs deriving from religious sources are often overlooked as a component of democratic politics (Barzilai, 2004: 13). Although prominent, these models are not the only ones capturing state–religion relations, and as Habermas (2008: 578) asserted, such notions of secularism that set clear boundaries between the spheres of the public and the private are not sophisticated enough to respond

to the multiple affiliations of modern citizens. With his model of post-secularism, Habermas has aptly demonstrated that secularism can have multiple alternatives in liberal democracies to better reflect the complexity of the empirical relationship between the comprehensive moral doctrines and the political organisation.

As a part of more sophisticated and pluralistic theorisations of secularism, similar to Habermas, John Keane and Amyn B. Sajoo have argued, secularism does not only need the institutional separation of the state from the religious and other comprehensive moral views. But secular democracy also "requires the institutional division between a certain form of state and civil society" (Keane, 1993: 28) so that individuals as part of active and free civil society are able to "freely associate with others outside the control of the state" (Sajoo, 2002: 215). Like Habermas, Sajoo (2004: 226) has emphasised "the need to separate the institutions of the state, religion and society, as a shared modern democratic and ethical imperative."

On this subject, going beyond the Habermasian paradigm of informal versus formal categories in favour of allocating more political strength to the 'informal' part of the argument, thinkers like An-Na'im make a far-reaching argument advocating the necessity of establishing "the distinction between the state and politics" for the ultimate success of democratisation processes in Muslim societies. An-Na'im (2000: 3-5) argues that "the organs and institutions of the state" — or the "more settled and deliberate operational side of self-governance" — and politics — or the more "dynamic process of making choices" for "organized political and social actors" holding "competing visions of the public good" — are to be differentiated from one another.

An-Na'im (2000: 3) persists that even in morally minimalist secular states, "complete independence is not possible because of the political nature of the state." Therefore, he concedes, it is necessary to form "a degree of separation of the state from politics" so that the state can show equal respect and undifferentiated treatment to all groups, and even at time of excesses of executive authority, the political mechanisms to resort to state institutions to retrieve the governmental errors and mistakes can be open. Accordingly, this degree of division becomes vital to guarantee the state's impartiality to "mediate and adjudicate among the competing visions and policy proposals" (An-Na'im, 2000: 3).

The distinction between the spheres of politics, or the government and the public sphere, is particularly essential when it comes to Muslim politics. Individual Muslims often view the materialisation of the religion's claims mandatory for them to pursue their definition of a good life. The very arguments in support of an ideological Islamic state and in contradiction of secularism are in fact a by-product of the popular conviction of the inseparability of religion and state (*din wa-dawlah*). To this effect, in order to produce an antidote for anti-democratic thinking, the paper focuses on identifying an analytical differentiation between the state public sphere and a civil society public sphere, of which the latter is termed 'social public sphere'. The state public sphere is conceptualised as the realm of shared political life and common institutions in which the core tasks of government are carried out the enduring basis of social unity and democratic regime. The state public sphere is not invested in moralising ideology, religiosity, or providing a comprehensive normative position. As a politically secular enterprise, as opposed to

philosophical secularism (laicism), the state public sphere protects individual rights of life, liberty, property, and contract to uphold its main goal of allowing individuals to flourish and safeguard their differences between the accounts of a good life.

Meanwhile, the social public sphere is defined as a distinct form of a political public sphere where the political establishment, voluntary organisations, and individuals interact in organising social life. The social public sphere is capacious and resourceful enough to adapt to the public roles of different normative perspectives, and accordingly the public needs and interests of people with different conceptions of a good life, based on principles of tolerance, reconciliation, and respect. In this model, the state, as the basic political structure of society, shares political space with civil society and empowers it. Referring to "an extensive interpretation of associational freedoms," the social public sphere suggests that "[m]any of the positive effects that states can bring about can also be obtained…through voluntary mechanisms" (Bader, 2007a: 53; Vallentyne and van der Vossen, 2014). Social public sphere here implies alternative public power of the civil society organisations recognised as "governing powers" that can regulate, organise, and administer social affairs, as categorically separate from the public power of the state (Hirst, 1994: 13). As such, "democratically negotiated freedom of religion from state interference" would "allow religious groups freedom not only to worship privately but to organize groups in civil society and political society" (Stepan, 2000: 42).

In essence, this differentiation between the state and the social public spheres ensures that there is no institutional link between religion and state institutions, despite the connectedness of religion and the public sphere. Here, the public "focus of [religions] is no longer the state but, rather, civil society" (Casanova, 1994: 63). It is based on devolution of moral and spiritual authorities from the state to the institutions and practices of the social public sphere. In this understanding, Islam has "an autonomous life in the hands of social actors" and not in the hands of hierarchical and formal religious authorities (Yavuz, 2007: 489). By doing so, "public policy can benefit from the moral guidance of religion, and pluralistic societies can enjoy peace and stability by regulating the relationship between religion and the state through secularism" (An-Na'im, 2002b: 8).

In fact, this categorical distinction between the different layers of the public sphere would guarantee the neutrality of the state realm by separating religion and state power, so that the autonomous rights of civil society to practice religion can be recognised and political processes that can satisfy substantive moral needs, demands, and interests can be accommodated. Essentially, the social public sphere is not one of the informal political deliberations in the Habermasian sense, but has some degree of institutional power, albeit different from that of the state. This amounts to a democratic decentralisation of state power, allocating a degree of formalised influence to organised religions as well as to other identity groups facilitated through administrative and political autonomy of voluntary minority associations (Bader, 2003b: 132). Essentially, dynamic and multi-layered understandings of the relationship among the state, civil society, and public sphere enables the social public sphere to provide resources and opportunities for the formalisation of the public functions of civil society (Hirst and Bader, 2001: 6-7).

After giving the conceptual explanations of both the state and the social public sphere categories, I now will primarily focus on conceptualising the social public sphere, as it is the sphere where religion—as a personal or a communal issue—can play a social and political role as a way to rearticulate its public role. As interconnected and relevant components of the social public sphere notion, the subsequent sub-sections will first articulate the notion of normative change at a societal level under the category of democratic toleration and at an institutional level under the institutional pluralism debate.

2.1. The Establishment of Democratic Toleration

Democratic toleration is the normative foundation of the social public sphere that enables the facilitation of different moral systems, protecting diverse views, and serving diverse interests. Democratic toleration is the shared normative commitment of citizens towards each other that reflects democratic consensus on respect, civility, and human rights despite their differing views and conflicting interests. In this project, the idea of democratic toleration, as inspired by Habermas, is brought together in the multiculturalism literature through the arguments of scholars such as Taylor and Chandran Kukathas and enriched with the ideas of Muslim intellectuals like Mohammad Talbi and An-Na'im.

Kukathas (1992: 108) defines toleration as people's freedom to pursue one's "various ends, individually or cooperatively." According to Kukathas (2003: 259) the liberal idea of toleration is the moral foundation of democracy and the basis for the justification of cultural, moral, or political pluralism. Likewise, Talbi, a prominent advocate of pluralism in Muslim political thought, advocates for normative religious acceptance and pluralism. Talbi (1995a: 62) states that human beings can "live together with our consciously assumed difference" through finding a "plateau" where "mutual respect and full acknowledgement of difference are attained" (Filali-Ansari, 2009: 2). Democratic toleration expects citizens to develop civility, recognising each other's identities and difference and respecting each other's rights to public presence.[2] Democratic toleration can only emerge in a society where individuals with competing and different positions are consciously and responsibly engaged in a dialogue and compromise to establish an overlapping consensus on "common public values" and "the common good of all on a moral basis" (Maclure and Taylor, 2011: 12, 15). This amounts to accepting the peaceful coexistence with rival doctrines and developing a firm allegiance to the political ideals of the democratic civic culture.

Habermas (2006: 14) discusses the "modernization of religious consciousness" as an important element for religious arguments and claims to be part of the public sphere. For him, tolerance building is the process of value change in which citizens with religious comprehensive views can endorse certain ideals of a shared democratic life (namely, tolerance, negotiation, pluralism, and dialogue). With that we can think about the "ways of both upholding the truth claims of their [Muslims'] religion and adopting the political

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[2] According to Edward Shils (1997: 47), "[C]ivility is compatible with other attachments to class, religion, and profession, but it regulates them out of respect for the common good."

values required to recognize the legitimacy of constitutional democracy" (March, 2011: 12). Similar to Habermas' religious modernisation idea, Mohamed Fadel (2008: 49) also concedes that both secular and religious citizens are hoped to recognise pluralism and "the legitimacy of the numerous and often contradictory options that resulted from the exercises of moral judgement." This involves the recognition that "reasonable non-Islamic [as well as dissenting Islamic] ways of life are nevertheless worthy of respect and constitutional protection, independent of the instrumental value of pluralism" (Fadel, 2008: 43). On the matter of how to cultivate the "philosophical conditions for pluralist democracy" to develop in Muslim societies (Hirschkind, 2008: 66), Nader Hashemi reveals that:

> Democratization does not require a privatization of religion, but it does require a reinterpretation of religious ideas that are conducive to liberal democracy (2009: 12).

I conceptualise democratic toleration to allow the conditions for cultivating intercultural dialogue and common language of citizens "firmly founded upon the diverse communities" sharing "in cross-religious moral concern" with human rights, the shared good, justice, and the rule of law (Sachedina, 2009: 176). Internal change within communities is expected to come as a product of an encounter they make with democratic structures and diverse social systems. In this process, the social public sphere facilitates social encounters, democratic communication, and pluralistic environment, leading citizens and groups "to think in part in terms of the interests of others," understand one another, and develop democratic toleration (Habermas, 2006: 15, 18). Democratic toleration necessitates that Muslims, like other citizens, recognise the right of individuals with diverse normative systems to observe freedoms as well as "the legitimacy of the numerous and often contradictory options that resulted from the exercises of moral judgement" in public debate (Fadel, 2008: 49).

The social public sphere is "the site where contests take place over the definition of the 'common good'" (Eickelman and Salvatore, 2002: 94). Believers and atheists, the secular and the religious, and people of different ethnicities, and cultural identities should all come together and engage to agree on the shared good (Connolly, 2005: 43). These actors should reach an agreement overcoming the endemic tension of "inter- and intra- religious domination" or ideological hegemony created within the public sphere (Bader, 2009a). Essentially, the social public sphere should harbour a range of moral and political perspectives in public deliberation, even though the majority may perceive some of these perspectives as "morally wrong" (Bader, 2003b: 114). Which perspective wins over the other in the process of achieving the shared good is decided through the broad deliberation within the various social forums of the public sphere. Yet no perspective is automatically more authoritative than others, and no perspective should be persecuted or criminalised. Very relevant to Muslim societies, the process of achieving the shared good "should be open and accessible to all citizens…without exposing themselves to charges of disbelief, apostasy or blasphemy" (An-Na'im, 2009: 149).

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that for the overlapping consensus to have normative weight in individual adherents of diverse philosophical and religious sects, it

needs to be "morally persuasive within their own system of moral, philosophical or religious commitments" (Fadel, 2008: 8; 2007: 4). Thus, the "accessibility" of religious and ethical logics/reasons are essential for both the development and maintenance of the common good (Sachedina, 2009: 177). This is a major division point between the democratic toleration idea as conceptualised in this work and the religious toleration idea in Habermas' theory. Habermas' religious toleration idea still operates on an orthodox liberal discourse centred on Rawls' account of public reason, where religious convictions and rational viewpoints are somehow dichotomous. Although Habermas accepts the possibility of certain religious argumentation, a rational or a civic understanding for religion —as a comprehensive moral doctrine— is highly unlikely for him. Thus, religious argumentation should be checked before the gates of the formal public sphere where a political and institutional impact is merited (Habermas, 2006: 10).

The democratic toleration idea proposed here goes beyond a Rawlsian public reason and proposes a religion friendly and normatively inclusive account of overlapping consensus and the shared good. The social public sphere idea is accommodative of religious logics and arguments in public deliberation on the belief that each citizen should be involved in this ongoing democratic communication with their secular, religious, or traditional comprehensive worldviews to create a political consensus as the currency of social life. On this subject, Monica Mookherjee (2001: 79) argues that a democratic state is obliged to protect the "capacity for reason" for all citizens, guaranteeing their involvement in constructing the idea of the common good rather than imposing its own account. The social public sphere notion rests on the conviction that "citizens arrive at an 'overlapping consensus' about the basic political principles, despite the differing conceptions they embrace regarding what a successful life is" (Maclure and Taylor, 2011: 17).

Overall, the social public sphere promotes mass moral transformation by bringing individual moral judgements to a closer alignment with democratic toleration associated with civility and mutual respect as the basis of social life in Muslim societies. Democratic toleration can facilitate an inclusive and religiously-friendly public structure; hence, promoting a substantial normative support basis for democracy, which would in return increase the probability of Muslim democratic consolidation. I will now seek to articulate a structural turn in recognising moral difference by diversifying pluralistic institutional arrangements in the social public sphere.

2.2. Institutional Pluralism

Conventionally, those who advocate religious accommodation, including Habermas, often restrict religion to the informal public sphere. This perspective implied the need for religious values to undertake a process of translation according to secular standards of rationality and thus the adoption of a single mode of communication in institutional (public) deliberation. However, in the social public sphere model advocated here, religious values and identities are allowed to influence public deliberation and organisation at an institutional level, reconciling both liberal and religious standards of rationality at an institutional level to consolidate societal harmony, human rights, tolerance, and respect.

Consideration of some kind of differentiation between the state and the public sphere ultimately opened up ways to think of institutional pluralism within democratic politics.

This distinction is essential to pave the way to a workable resolution on the issue of the role of religion in the public sphere. The institutional pluralism idea conceptualised in this work represents an expansion of religious freedoms for the accommodation of diverse — minority and majority alike — needs and interests. The social public sphere is understood as the terrain of diversity where collaboration of the state and voluntary public associations can deliver more extensive and complete services. It opens up administrative and economic opportunities for the public functions of religion at the hands of "democratically controlled voluntary associations" (Hirst, 1997: 13).

Under institutional pluralism, citizens with diverse comprehensive philosophical doctrines have a "greater control of their affairs" in organising and funding public services and the welfare sector. Civil society actors, such as faith-based or cultural associations, can also be the service providers in various arenas of public life such as education, health care, seniors' care, social work, and finance (Hirst, 1997: 13). Hence, the institutional pluralism of the social public sphere makes available diverse political platforms and broader social forums through which groups with distinct and divergent goods and interests have public presence and play public roles.

Such diversity also shapes the forms in which institutional pluralism is implemented in reality, for there is no single path to institutional pluralism and it is up to the processes undertaken in the social public sphere to determine the resulting collaboration between state and civil society. To take the real-life example of education, we can observe different models of institutional pluralism articulated in the literature. These include Veit Bader's (2007a: 271) model of separate faith schools and Ayelet Shachar's (2008: 154) model of "power-dividing and sharing arrangements". As a form of pluralist institutionalist arrangement, Bader has argued for separate faith-based schools, where religious groups are given institutional autonomy in education to have their own schools. Shachar, on the other hand, advocates for state schools providing a common education but giving religious groups the right to control religious instruction and curriculum, like in Germany and Austria. When it comes to associational services, therefore, the social public sphere framework proposed here is aware of the importance of context specificity depending on the specific political experimentalism of a particular society and the already existing institutional designs in these societies (Shachar, 2009: 134).

Continuing with the example of education, even under predominantly Muslim contexts, the nature and characteristics of institutional pluralism can take various shapes and forms. Within institutional pluralism, how much power will be given to civil society actors and community-based organisations is not only a theoretical question but is one that is negotiated on a day-to-day basis. Issues like whether religious classes should be held within or outside civic schools, what the appropriate age for pupils to attend religious classes is, and how curricula should be organised and classes administered would be resolved differently. In some Muslim-majority contexts, separate faith schools might be the case while in others a power-sharing education structure may be more fit for democratic consolidation. Yet in order to resolve the state's relation to social and religious affairs, some form of institutional pluralism seems necessary for the consolidation of Muslim democracy.

In essence then, the framework of institutional pluralism advocated in this work aims to give voice and agency to both civil society and individuals alongside the state. It provides civil society with greater space to perform some of the functions of the state while simultaneously ensuring voluntariness and the freedom of citizens to choose among governmental and societal organisations through democratic mechanisms and constitutional safeguards. The social public sphere thus primarily aims to empower alternative communities and give them certain public credentials by institutionalising pluralism for several important reasons. First, it is believed that individuals should have a right to collective goods and the ability to fully pursue what they define as a good life. By promoting religious freedoms, institutional pluralism in fact enhances the autonomy and capacities of individuals with diverse normative systems. Second, if groups and ideologies are excluded from political influence, they are likely to hijack democracy; they could either become reactionary by feeding extremism or revolutionary by infiltrating the state apparatus to impose their ideology and capture state power to reclaim authority. Third, it is important to distinguish between official recognition and actual presence: if religious or cultural ways of life are unrecognised, this does not mean that they are nonexistent. On this acknowledgement, as opposed to neglecting already existing practices, institutional pluralism would put minority group interactions under scrutiny and regulate the communal religious practices that remain unnoticed when unofficial, which in turn would facilitate the meaningful protection of the rights of the vulnerable members in these groups. As such, institutional pluralism promotes higher regulatory mechanisms to ensure universal human rights standards and basic liberties (Hirst, 1994: 25).

Consequently, this framework that compels interaction between the state and these groups has the potential for a more inclusive governing of a diverse citizenry and a more interactive mode of peaceful coexistence between the state and groups with diverse normative systems. The democratic culture of equal participation, civic dialogue, and deliberation that the social public sphere creates would thus have greater potential to improve social interactions and resolve normative disputes residing in public life. In a setting of robust institutional and legal protections, the interactivity, frequency, and familiarity of diverse ideas, practices, and norms—even those which might be unorthodox or condemned—could eventually develop toleration and gain acceptance if their proponents are given the space to symbiotically interact and communicate with their opponents on equal grounds. Thus, the visibility and legality of political and moral differences are very important and they indirectly lead to the development of a tolerant civil society (and the construction of civility and democratic toleration). By opening up the public sphere and delegating certain public powers to civil society, institutional pluralism facilitates democratic consolidation on both structural and normative grounds.

In this sense, the social public sphere framework endorses the idea that "better institutional design" with inclusive and safe public platforms that protect individual liberties and facilitate the functional roles of civil society will prop up "liberal democratic practices" and values (Volpi, 2004: 1074). Accordingly, institutional pluralism reorients the idea of institutional pluralism of multiculturalism, which was asserted within Western democracies, to adopt it in a Muslim-majority context with the help of theoretically relevant concepts. By and large, the social public sphere has offered conceptual resources

to organise institutional pluralism, provided there is sufficient shared normative commitments to democratic toleration and human rights. As such, institutional pluralism involves more rights and autonomy for religious people, yet a democracy, in general, requires the moral endorsement to the ethos of pluralism by all.

Concluding Remarks

The expression "return of religion" refers to the heightened rethinking of the role of religion in contemporary political theory since the early 2000s, which has spawned new theorisations on the public sphere (McClure, 1997; Lambert, 2016). As a prominent example, Jürgen Habermas' post-secularism approach proposed an enlightened idea of secularism as opposed to anti-pluralist universal republican models commonly referred to as laicism. In Habermas' theory, secularism is taken away from being a sacred moral ideology imposing a certain conception of the good upon citizenry to a thin moral good institutionally administering social coexistence and political organisation. In this model, citizens share societal lives without abstracting from their public differences in the 'informal public sphere' where religious tolerance is the normative currency of collective life.

However, in Habermas' theory, the idea of religious individuals and groups having an administrative muscle and public autonomy is not yet conceivable. Alternatively, I argue that for democracy to be consolidated in the Muslim world, secularism should be reoriented more substantially than Habermas' endeavour, so it can accommodate the public claims and needs of Muslim peoples. On this matter, I have proposed an idea of the social public sphere, a distinct form of a political public sphere allocated for civil society politics that permits Muslims to live what they morally and rationally choose as a good life. The social public sphere is identified as unique relative to other democratic public space structures due to its capacity to adapt to the role of religion in civil society, where religious convictions at the hands of individual moral agents are hoped to take a more reformed route.

The ways in which the social public sphere can work and become consolidated is discussed through two conceptual components. First, democratic toleration reflects the shared normative commitment to democratic consensus on respect, pluralism, and human rights, representing the normative formation of democratic consensus. Democratic toleration also maintains the religious arguments, when articulated in a free and analytical manner and closely aligned with civility and pluralism, to be part of public contests over the definition of the shared good and religious people to have the public accessibility to pursue their vision of a good life. Second, institutional pluralism has captured the change in the institutional framework that gives impartial access to public life and accommodating Islamic ways of life and its associational claims. It envisages civil society functioning in the sense of a social public sphere, where civil society organisations share institutional powers alongside the state in delivering public services, which has the potential to serve the democratic consolidation in societies where the issue of moral diversity and the relationship between secularism and Islam require enlightened undertakings. Overall, the social public sphere is conceptualised as the terrain where people can meaningfully engage with both deeply held religious beliefs and democratic values, allowing for a political

organisation where Muslims who are committed to follow religious guidance can be equally committed to the ethos of pluralism and the principles of democracy.

By and large, I brought together in a more systemic fashion various types of political philosophies on the public sphere into productive contact to develop an idea of the social public sphere that is particular to Muslim-majority societies, taking into consideration the specific role that Islam plays in these societies and the shared barriers ahead of genuine democratisation. This model is argued to have a better capacity to house moral diversity and pluralism and thus has the potential to work towards the democratic consolidation for certain reasons. First, the social public sphere has formulated new dimensions of the religious sphere in modern democracies, connecting private and public life while safeguarding and underpinning democratic principles of toleration, pluralism, and diversity. Second, the social public sphere is articulated as pluralistic to accommodate dominant and non-dominant outlooks and their legitimate public rights, beyond the domination of the state or the dominant moral discourses. It welcomes comprehensive moralities as legitimate forces, allowing public space for the diversity of lifestyles, whether professed by majority or minority groups, to be practised out of volition. Finally, by ensuring the separation of religion and governance, it also aims to maintain the state public sphere as morally minimalist and impartial towards all citizens. It is based on devolution of moral and spiritual authorities from the state to the institutions and practices of the social public sphere.

Essentially, the social public sphere can provide an effective alternative to resolve the Islamic–secularist clash impeding democratisation efforts in Muslim contexts by equally including both religious and secular forces into political processes. It seeks to overcome the complex dilemma Muslim societies have been exposed to in which:

> either religion strives to colonize and subjugate worldly politics,
> thereby erecting itself into a public power, or else politics
> colonizes religious faith by expanding itself into a totalizing,
> quasi-religious panacea or ideology (Dallmayr, 2011: 439).

The social public sphere idea has proposed an alternative notion to capture the empirical relationship between religion and politics, especially in a direction serving towards democratic consolidation within Muslim-majority contexts.

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