Jose Casanova and Anne Phillips seem to agree on a key point: they both reject what they call “dogmatic” or “strident” secularism. Both scholars are opposed to what Phillips calls a “pre-emptive embargo on the public role of religion,” since, in their view, religions are not inherently hostile to gender equality. Both authors note, however, that religions tend to be conservative in matters concerning gender and sexuality. This, more or less, is where both their focus and their views appear to diverge. I would define the difference between their standpoints as follows: Jose Casanova is a scholar of religion and is both more interested in, and more sympathetic towards, religion, than towards the whole problematic of gender inequality. He is also optimistic about religions’ capacity for self-reform (hence his focus on internal critique). Anne Phillips, on the other hand, as a feminist scholar, is primarily interested in the tensions between women’s rights and religious beliefs as well as – perhaps more importantly – religious institutions. Skeptical of a rigid distinction between culture and religion, she draws a useful parallel between the present debate and the one on women’s rights and cultural rights in multicultural contexts. I admit my own views are close to hers. Like Phillips, I respect religion, but am convinced that the issue at stake is not religious belief, but power, representation, and the interface between religion, culture and politics.
As in his influential study *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova is primarily concerned with rejecting the radical secularist standpoint. He demonstrates that demands and hopes for strict separation between religion and public life are (1) philosophically naïve, because, secularism itself is in fact the product of a specifically Western European historical trajectory and (2) detached from reality, because secularism is based on a grave misconception about contemporary politics. He shows that the view that modernity is inevitably linked to the weakening and privatization of religious commitment is simply wrong. He describes a reverse process, which he calls the “de-privatization of religion” – a world-wide trend of enormous impetus and scope, in progress since the early 1980. Thus, whether we like it or not, radical theories of secularization are on the defensive; they have lost their explanatory and descriptive power.

Casanova draws a number of subtle and historically informed distinctions between various meanings of the term “secularization” and between various models of relations between state and religion, modernization and secularization (notably, he develops a contrast between European and the American trajectories, and between the Latin-Catholic and Anglo-Protestant models of secularization). In short, Casanova’s work provides a useful re-conceptualization of the relations between religion and modernity, his key claim being that the modernity and (public) religion are by no means mutually exclusive, and that in fact there is not one but multiple modernities which must be distinguished in this debate.

While I agree with this diagnosis, I have a serious problem with Casanova’s value judgments and predictions. I do not share his optimism concerning the impact of politicized religion on democracy. Troubling, too, is his largely dismissive take on the impact on the de-privatized religion on women’s rights worldwide. Although he gives some space to
critics, his analysis of relations between gender equality and religion is cursory, a mere afterthought to his broader theoretical framework.

If Casanova speaks as a sociologist of religion, Phillips is clearly tackling the subject as a feminist scholar. I read her piece as a careful effort to show that respect for religion should not force us to abandon insistence on gender equality. Phillips argues that while we should not revert to “shrill” polemical versions of secularism, which antagonize believers and create further backlash against women’s rights, nonetheless, respect for religion should not prevent us from asking tough political questions concerning the often negative impact of religion on gender equality. The fact that many women choose religion should not blind us to the way religion can be coercive – in fact, as Phillips points out elsewhere, the very concept of choice is deeply problematic, and has long been the object of critique in feminist theory.¹ Specifically, choice and coercion are often disconcertingly mixed where religion is concerned.

An important element of Phillips’ argument is her distinction between “ethical” and “political” stance. As she writes in her paper, “while we should not assume that gender equality is at odds with religion, the political questions remain.” The ethical question concerns our willingness to take religion seriously (“we should allow religion to be religion, (...) and not require of it that it promotes democracy or egalitarian social movements”). But this ethical stand should not make us forget that political questions still remain to be asked. These concern the messy overlap between religion and culture, the legal issues concerning

the status of religious tribunals, the general problem of human agency and choice *vis a vis* religion. Phillips brings into focus the fact that religions are not just belief systems, but also institutions, wielding great authority and real power over individuals. She endorses – despite some reservations that emerge from feminist critique of liberalism – the discourse of individual rights, arguing that rights matter “particularly when considering claims by religious communities for autonomy over ‘their’ internal affairs; and situations where a religion has assumed such social or political dominance that there is no longer a convincing possibility of determining whether its precepts are being voluntarily embraced.”

I am a secular – but, I hope, not “dogmatically secularist” – feminist living in just such a situation, a non-believer living in a country where the domination of religion is felt on a daily basis, the boundaries between state and church are notoriously blurred, while the influence of the Catholic church remains obsessively focused on women’s rights. What makes things even more complicated for Poland, and the power of the clergy more intense than in most other places on the globe, is the overlap between religion and national identity. The link between them has played an important role during Poland’s European Union accession, with conservatism on matters concerning women and sexual minorities becoming Poland’s mark of difference and pride within the E.U. This entanglement makes theoretical distinctions between religion and culture sound utterly hollow.

Not surprisingly, I find myself in agreement with Phillips on most points – her framework fits my experience. Like her, I believe that Casanova does not engage sufficiently with the severity of the problems involved. Moreover, he wrongly views the issue at stake as one of access (e.g. to priesthood) rather than coercion. From my perspective, Casanova’s approach has two major weaknesses: its unfounded optimism about the inevitability of progressive reform, and its privileging of internal critique of religion.
First, a few fords about the excess of optimism. Casanova speaks of the Catholic church as an institution that has undergone profound change during aggiornamento of the 1960s, when it embraced human rights, recognized religious freedom, and contributed to democracy while limiting its political activity to civil society. He writes:

the official adoption of the modern discourse of human rights allowed the Catholic church to play a crucial role in opposition to authoritarian regimes and in processes of democratization throughout the Catholic world. But the Catholic church's embrace of voluntary disestablishment did not mean the privatization of Catholicism but rather its relocation from the state to the public sphere of civil society.

Casanova presents these positive internal changes as an established fact, and admires the transformation of Catholic parties everywhere, asking only whether Islam is going to follow suit. His sympathy for the church as an institution is evident throughout the text, and I can only say that I do not share it and do not recognize the church he describes.

The Catholic church I know is not open to debate, especially where women’s rights are concerned. In fact it is committed to stopping democratic debate whenever possible: Polish bishops have repeatedly stated that neither abortion nor IVF treatment are should be debated. As a result, the space of public debate on issues concerning fertility and family planning is largely closed to women’s voices. The church in Poland is a powerful political player, hostile to all dissenters, deeply suspicious of democratic process, anti-liberal, eager to embrace ever more power and property. It is hostile to the discourse of human rights (in church rhetoric they are often referred to as “so called human rights”), and if it embraces the concept it is to co-opt it, by attributing Human Rights to fetuses. This is the Catholic church I know. What Casanova presents as willing self-reform of a modernizing institution, I am inclined to view as limited and largely forced adjustment, made regretfully and only under pressure. The fact that no such adjustment has occurred in Poland in recent years – in fact, the church seems to have become more restrictive and conservative in many respects –
suggests what we are dealing with neither dialogue nor growth, but with a power struggle.

Casanova’s carefully drawn distinction between 3 types of public religion – operating on the level of state, political society and civil society – is hardly helpful in this context, as I see the church operating on all three levels simultaneously. Moreover, its engagement in civil society, is, in my view, far more problematic from a women’s rights perspective than Casanova envisions. In many areas the state has given up its responsibility to the church, abdicating the value of gender equality. For instance, when priests and nuns take over shelters for victims of domestic violence, the ideological basis of such institutions shifts from women’s empowerment and self-respect to sacrifice (women are told to “bear their crosses” and save their marriages, rather than their lives).

My second general objection has to do with the priority Casanova accords to internal critique of religion. As Phillips notes, he misses the point about the scope of rights that are potentially endangered by religion, because his focus is on equal rights within a religious community – e.g. access to priesthood. Such an approach evades several key issues, as it leaves out the question of the complex relationship between religion and culture, the way religious influence tends to spread beyond the religious community in question. As Phillips points out, internal critiques rely on a rather naïve distinction between religion and culture, in the hope of discovering some pure version of religion free of cultural influence. Sadly, such untouched territory simply does not exist; the distinction between culture and religion is never sharp.

Excessive focus on internal reform also leads one to ignore the impact of external context on change within religion. Phillips rightly argues that reforms tend to occur when there is pressure from the state (in Poland there is almost none, which is why reform does not occur). It is naïve to believe that apologies and compensations for pedophile scandals in
the USA, or the recent Irish debate concerning atrocities in church-ran orphanages would have occurred without political and legal pressure from the outside, without the impact of the media, social movements, lawsuits, etc.

Finally, left out of such a perspective are the concerns of non-believers living in countries where religion and politics are mutually entangled. As a non-Catholic living in Poland, I am far less concerned with women’s access to priesthood or theological debates concerning the gender of God and the image of Virgin Mary, than with the pressure exerted by the church on the state. What troubles me is the success of church-ran campaigns against abortion, contraception and sexual minorities, the efforts to ban IVF treatment for infertile couples, the increasing control of the church of the process of adoption. All these aspects of church influence are aimed at reproductive rights of Polish citizens regardless of their religious affiliation or beliefs. The reasons for the political success of the church in Poland have little to do with democratic process: it is not that Polish society shares the views of the Church on matters of sexuality and reproduction, but that the public sphere in Poland has become dominated by the people (mostly men) committed to the church agenda. Without consulting Polish citizens, the Polish state has willingly abdicated to the clergy in many areas, offering public space for religious symbols, state funding for religious education, religiously motivated censorship for art (“offense to religious sensibility” is an increasingly broad category of offenses).

All this must be viewed not as a matter of religious belief or lack thereof, but as a question of power. As Monika Karbowska, a feminist activist living in France has put it: “The Catholic church is a powerful institution, hierarchical, centralized and not democratic, which has decided to turn my country into its own private garden.” The flowers under special cultivation – to be spread throughout Europe later – are traditional notions about
gender and sexuality. Needless to say, Polish women are increasingly resistant to their role as fertile land for this horticultural experiment.

The most fruitful and interesting area for debate that seems to emerge from Casanova’s and Phillips’ exchange is the religion-culture-nation overlap. The post-colonial critique of secular dogmatism and liberal universalism often include insistence that religion be separated from culture. It was, among other things, her failure to do so that that made Susan Okin’s famous argument that “multiculturalism is bad for women” so vulnerable to critique (e.g. by Martha Nussbaum in the same volume).\(^2\) Phillips reminds us that the distinction necessary, and religion should be viewed as such – otherwise it is hard acknowledge, let alone understand feminist activism growing within religions, or to distinguish between progressive and fundamentalist strains within religious movements. Yet it is also necessary to acknowledge the extent to which the boundary between religion and culture can be and often is blurred, especially in contexts where religious affiliation is closely linked to ethnic belonging, as is the case in Poland. To reject Roman Catholicism in Poland is to put in question one’s legitimacy as a member of the nation. Given the investment of the church in opposition to gender equality, this means that feminism is construed by many as a foreign import, essentially anti-Polish, and a threat to cultural identity. Until recently the very term “Polish feminist” sounded almost like an oxymoron.

The effect of the religion-culture-nation overlap is instrumentalization of women’s rights. Such a context makes feminist activism extremely difficult, as it becomes

entangled in, or even hijacked by, other conflicts. This is by no means a scenario unique to Poland. In the context of religious and ethnic tension and strife, women are often reduced by both sides to the role of bearers of identity. This dynamic is mentioned by Phillips in several contexts: she notes for instance, that in Europe “It has proved difficult, in this context, to mobilise effectively against forced marriage or honour killings without inadvertently mobilising anti-immigrant, often anti-Muslim, sentiment”.

To conclude, though I would hate to be labeled as a “shrill” or “radical” secularist, my concern is primarily with the ways religions do come into conflict with women’s rights: the ways they limit women’s freedom, legitimize and enhance conservative backlash against feminism, help naturalize cruelty when women are concerned. I agree with both speakers that religion must be both respected and treated as religion (not reduced to the status of a political worldview) and that women who are believers are to be viewed as free agents and not as victims. Yet, in the end, if we are to speak meaningfully of the impact of religions on women’s rights, on their well-being and value as human beings, we must be willing to note the blatant imbalance of power. We are not addressing religious beliefs as such here, or weighing them against some alternative set of beliefs. Our proper topic, I believe, is the vast scope and legitimacy of the authority of religious institutions versus the fragility of the relatively recent ideal of gender equality. Religion is not always and not necessarily an enemy of equality, nor is it its only enemy. Yet we must face the fact that the tension between the two is real.