The central thesis of my book “Public Religions in the Modern World” has been that we are witnessing a process of deprivatization of religion as a relatively new global trend across all religious traditions and in all regions of the world. But beside this new empirical trend, I claim that the deprivatization of religion does not need to be interpreted necessarily as an anti-modern, anti-secular or an anti-democratic reaction. But what is a public religion? Public religion is a religion which has, assumes or tries to assume a public character, function or role. Using the analytical distinction between the three areas of the modern polity: state, political society and civil society, one can distinguish three different types of public religion that correspond to these three areas. Established state churches could be the paradigmatic example of a public religion at the state level. Religions which mobilize their institutional resources for political competition through political parties, social movements, or lobbying agencies would be examples of public religion at the level of political society. Finally, public religions at the civil society level would be exemplified by religions which enter the public square, that is, the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society, to participate in open public debates about the res publica, that is, about public issues, public affairs, public policy and the common good or commonwealth.

Obviously, this is an analytical, one could say, “ideal-typical” distinction. In actual empirical reality the boundaries between the three areas of the polity are by no means so clear cut and therefore the delineation of the different types of public religion can also not always be clear and distinct. Nevertheless, the purpose of the analytical distinction was to put into question any rigid theory of privatization which would like to restrict religion to the private sphere on the grounds that any form of public religion represents a threat to the public sphere or to democratic politics. Empirically, the case studies illustrated various instances in which public religious mobilization had contributed to the democratization of authoritarian polities in Spain, Poland, and Brazil or to the enlivening of democratic politics and the public sphere of civil society in the United States. Obviously, one could also show many other empirical instances in which, by contrast, the political mobilization of religion may have undermined or endangered democratic politics. Consequently, the
meaningful question cannot be whether “public religion” in general, much less whether “religion” in the abstract, is good or bad, ally or threat, but which kind of public religion, in which particular context, for which particular purpose?

My own analysis of the deprivatization of religion tried to contain, at least normatively, public religions within the public sphere of civil society, without allowing them to spillover onto political society or the democratic state. This remains my own personal normative and political preference, but I am not certain that the secular separation of religion from political society or even from the state are universalizable maxims, in the sense that they are either necessary or sufficient conditions for democratic politics. Today I must recognize my own modern Western secular prejudices and the particular hermeneutic Catholic and "ecclesiastical" perspective on religion which I adopted in my comparative analysis of the relations between church, state, nation and civil society in Western Catholic and Protestant societies. The moment one adopts a global comparative perspective, one must admit that the deprivatization of religion is unlikely to be contained within the public sphere of civil society, within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, and within the constitutional premises of ecclesiastical disestablishment and juridical separation of church and state. We need to go beyond the secularist discourse of separation and beyond the public sphere of civil society, in order to address the real issues of democratic politics around the world.

The rules for protection from the tyranny of religious majorities should be the same democratic rules used to defend from the tyranny of any democratic majority. The protection of the rights of any minority, religious or secular, and equal universal access should be central normative principles of any liberal democratic system. In principle one should not need any additional particular secularist principle or legislation. But as a matter of fact, historically-pragmatically, it may be necessary to disestablish “churches”, that is, ecclesiastical institutions that claim either monopolistic rights over a territory or particular privileges, or it may be necessary to use constitutional and at times extra-ordinary means to disempower entrenched tyrannical majorities.

The Catholic aggiornamento led to a fundamental relocation of the Catholic Church from a state-oriented to a civil society-oriented institution. Moreover, 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. This is the hermeneutic context within which I developed the analytical framework of modern public religions and the theory of de-privatization. But obviously, there are many other forms of modern public religions and other forms of de-privatization.
Alfred Stepan has pointed out how the most important empirical analytical theories of democracy, from Robert Dahl to Juan Linz, do not include secularism or strict separation as one of the institutional requirements for democracy, as prominent normative liberal theories such as those of John Rawls or Bruce Ackerman or Jürgen Habermas tend to do. As an alternative to secularist principles or norms, Stepan has proposed the model of the “twin tolerations”, which he describes as the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-à-vis religious groups and religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-à-vis political institutions. Within such a framework of mutual autonomy, Stepan concludes, “there can be an extraordinarily broad range of concrete patterns of religion-state relations in political systems that would meet our minimal definition of democracy.”

In fact, Europe itself illustrates the extraordinary broad range of concrete patterns of religion-state relations which are compatible with democracy. Despite all the normative discourse and the often repeated trope of the modern secular democratic state and the privatization of religion, it is legitimate in fact to ask how secular are really the European states? If one looks at the reality of “really existing” European democracies rather than at the official secularist discourse, it becomes obvious that most European states are by no means strictly secular nor do they tend to live up to the myth of secular neutrality.

Since on the other hand there are many historical examples of European states that were secular and non-democratic, the Soviet-type communist regimes being the most obvious case, one can conclude that the strict secular separation of church and state is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for democracy. Between the two extremes of French laïcité and Nordic Lutheran establishment, there is moreover, within Europe, a whole range of very diverse patterns of church-state relations, in education, media, health and social services, etc., which constitute very “unsecular” entanglements, such as the consociational formula of pillarization in the Netherlands, or the corporatist official state recognition of the Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany, as well as of the Jewish community in some Länder.

As to public religion in political society, one should not lose sight of the fact that, at one time or another, most continental European societies developed confessional religious parties, which played a crucial role in the democratization of those societies. Even those confessional parties which initially emerged as anti-liberal and at least ideologically as anti-democratic parties, as was the case with most Catholic parties in the 19th century, ended up playing a very important role.

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in the democratization of their societies. This is the paradox of Christian Democracy so well ana-
lyzed by Stathis Kalyvas.2

In sum, I cannot find either on democratic or on liberal grounds a compelling reason to ban-
ish in principle religion from the public democratic sphere. One could at most, on pragmatic histori-
ical grounds, defend the need for separation between “church” and “state”, whenever ecclesiastical
institutions or religious authorities impede the free exercise of religion and basic democratic rights,
including of course women’s rights, gender rights, and sexual rights. But in any case, the attempt to
establish a wall of separation between “religion” and “politics” is unlikely to succeed and probably
counterproductive for democracy itself. Curtailing the “free exercise of religion” per se must lead to
curtailing the free exercise of the civil and political rights of religious citizens and will ultimately
infringe on the vitality of a democratic civil society. Particular religious discourses or particular
religious practices may be objectionable, and susceptible to legal prohibition, on some democratic
or liberal ground, but not because they are “religious” per se.

This is especially relevant in the case of the politics of gender equality and women rights. It
is neither possible nor advisable to restrict empirically or normatively the “religious” politics of
gender equality to the public sphere of civil society. What is desirable is to subject religious dis-
courses legitimating patriarchal customs or discriminatory gender practices to open public debate
and to political contestation. But this in itself is a form of deprivatization of religion that thrusts
religion necessarily into the political arena. What makes blatant gender discrimination and patriar-
chal practices objectionable is not the fact that they may be grounded in religious discourse, but the
fact that they violate basic democratic and legal norms of equality. The democratic solution cannot
be to outlaw religious discourse or patriarchal norms but to subject such a discourse to public debate
and to subject collective norms to legal-political democratic processes.

The religious politics of gender worldwide has become one of the most important issues fac-
ing global humanity and is likely to remain an issue of increasing relevance for the foreseeable fu-
ture. Indeed, religious politics and the politics of gender appear to be so ubiquitously entangled that
it is not surprising that so many analysts have even been tempted to interpret what they construct as
a singular global resurgence of religious “fundamentalism” in all religious traditions as primarily a
patriarchal reaction against the common global threat of gender equality, the emancipation of wo-
men, and feminism. Feminism appears to have replaced communism as “the specter” haunting all
religious traditions. In turn, the discourses of feminism and secularism have become intertwined
today in the same way as communism and atheism became intertwined in the 19th century. “Gen-
der” or “the Woman question” has become in this respect the preeminently contested “social ques-

tion,” 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 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. The unholy alliance of “patriarchy” and “altar,” which such an attitude fosters, provokes in turn the secularist response of feminists, particularly in the West, who tend to view religious fundamentalism, indeed “religion” itself, as the main obstacle to the global advance of women’s rights and the progressive emancipation of women, and therefore will tend to advocate the secularization of state, politics, law and morality. At least in Europe, the need to advance and protect gender equality and women’s rights has become today the most common normative justification of secularism.

Secularist discourses on “religion”, in the abstract, will inevitably lead to the essentialist reification of religion, mirroring ironically the essentialist reification of “gender” one finds in traditionalist and fundamentalist religious discourses. To a certain extent any general discussion of “religion”, “gender” and “politics” will necessarily lead to some essentialist reification of all three. Yet, generalization and therefore some reification is inevitable in scholarly as much as in moral-practical and political discourse. Although I will be making general references to religion in my final comments, most of my reflections will be contextually derived from my recent engagement with the comparative analysis of Catholicism and Islam as religious regimes and as discursive traditions.

The point I want to make, that strategically at least, internal critiques aiming to reform aspects of religious tradition may have at least as good chances, and sometimes better, to succeed the external frontal attacks against any religious tradition. There are many compelling critiques of religious patriarchy from an external secularist or liberal feminist position which reflect the normative consensus in most advanced Western democratic societies in the last decades. Those external critiques are very useful and very necessary. But today I want to adopt consciously what could be called an internal critique from within the normative claims of religious traditions. In discussing the religious politics of gender, one can distinguish three different types of issues. First, the issue of women’s status and roles in different religious traditions, that is the kind of institutionalized gendered religious division of labour within particular religious regimes. Second, the subject of cultural images, ideas, stereotypes, and norms about women within diverse religious discursive traditions, and third, the question what women as religious subjects do and think, that is the question of the historical agency of religious women today in the contemporary reproduction and transformation of
their religious traditions, and the insertion of religious discourses and practices in the contested politics of gender equality. And the point I want to make is that, of course, all the great religious traditions have a transcendent norm of equality, particularly in the monotheistic religious traditions, before God, because in practice these discourses were institutionalized within patriarchal systems, which have been hegemonic until very recently. But we can see within all these religious traditions, the emergence of very important religious feminist discourses which are challenging these traditions from within.

So the fundamental question is that the deprivatization as I have stressed here is a two-way street. It implies not only religious actors bringing religious norms into the secular public sphere, but also secular norms, in particular secular norms of gender equality, inevitably entering and affecting the religious sphere. Only through radical sectarian segregation from society and from the world can a religious community avoid secular influence. Under conditions of globalization no religious tradition, much less those with universal global claims, can be immune from global public opinion.

The point I want to make is that this raises fundamental issues about what is private, what is public, what is to be left for religious traditions, for religious groups to define. What should be open to public debate? I am basically ready to say, everything should be open to public debate and public deliberation. It is up to democratic processes, precisely to challenging any rigorous separation of the private and the public, to present all kinds of normative and moral claims to the public sphere. It may be so that religions by entering the public sphere present a threat. But by making themselves public, they also open to counter-contestation. When religious authorities enter the public sphere, to say, let’s face it, stupid things then they open themselves, of course, to delegitimation, simply by opening these issues to public debate and democratic legitimation. Second, it will be the agency of women and the role they play in reproducing their own traditions that ultimately will decide the fate of these religious traditions.