Chercheurs de dieux dans l'espace public - Frontier Religions in Public Space

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On July 25th 1998, the book contributors met at the University of Quebec in Montreal for a one-day seminar on religious innovation called at the initiative of Laval University's "Groupe de recherche en sciences de la religion". Offering some perspective on the multidimensionality of the phenomenon was the objective of gathering these experts and professionals, which was made possible due to the upcoming World congress of sociology.

Coming out of the various papers, first, are contrasted images on religious innovation suggested by the ebbs and flows of religious creativity, the directionalities of change, and the streamlinings of regulation. Pictures emerge of the possibilities and limits, opportunities and constraints of religious innovation (Dawson, Palmer). Images of religious pluralism, and others of media controversy, religious ‘entrenchment’, and political debates also take form (Baubérot, Campiche, Bouchard, Introvigne). And one envisions ways in which religious and legal creativity is fostered by judicial ordeals, as well as exertions of social control through judicial discretion and enforcement of normative values (Wah, Carbonneau, Richardson).

Some inherent logic, though, govern these contrasted images. All contributors have extensive knowledge in the field of religion, and share a dynamic view of what might be termed "Public Space- Building". This expression has been elected, most of all, to denote an empirical acception of the public sphere. In addition, the religious innovators' attempts to make inroads in publics, and to 'make room' for themselves in the religious sector, as well convey the image of space, open and disputed space, more than the image of some discrete sphere. Hence, reference to public space building. Finally, public authorities' involvement in the
process bear some analogy to “Nation State Building”. Public authorities, be they administrative, judicial, legislative, ultimately decide what will be deemed Public and private, Sacred, religious, secular, sectarian, and will thus be allowed in different sectors of activity on state territory.

But how does Public Space-Building occur? While ‘Exploring the Religious Frontier’ in Part one of this book, readers are reminded first of the sheer diversity and vitality of contemporary religious experiences. New modes of communication help drive religious discourse into Cyberspace, but can change consciousness and culture in the process. In systematic fashion, Lorne Dawson discusses the promises and perils of the new public space opened by the Internet. He cautions that the overall impact is hard to see clearly, not only because the domain is relatively new and so fast-changing, but also because hard data is still missing “...about such crucial issues as the creation and maintenance of communities in cyberspace or the social and psychological implications of prolonged exposure to life in cyberspace.” What already emerges though, is that “The Internet will be a crucial forum for the promotion of religious change, innovation, conflict, and dialogue...”

These are precisely the forms of social exchange in public space that could benefit from the reflection, if not the active input, of sociologists of religion. According to Eileen Barker: “Frontier religions are, by definition, those that are breaking new ground and they tend, almost by definition, to consist of first-generation converts who have chosen to move on from the old beliefs and practices of their parents and the rest of society”. This points to the religious frontier as a source of fear, anxiety and suspicion in general publics. Such initiative as INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) has been taken by the author and partners in academic, religion, government, together with parents and other concerned parties, to provide accessible information on what occur in new religions. As well, the religious frontier generates an ‘uncertainty zone’ for public authorities, soon identified as ‘policy gap’ by proactive regulators. In the midst of controversy, Barker argues in favour of “...as objective and contextualized an account of the movements as possible”, whereas social scientists can best play their professional part in public debate. To her, this means being accurate, “without bias on either side”, and, most of all, put accurate facts in “comparative context so that visibility is not confused with frequency or typicality”. Indeed, this is exactly what happens with media regulation of religious innovation, which make losers of circumlocuted (God forbid, circumvoluted) social scientists!
But sociologists of religion, first of all, need to recapture the commonalities between ‘cults’ and ‘normal religion’ beyond social categorization of new and minority religions. The barrier separating these religious phenomena is an artificial one, Beckford states, one that exaggerates deviance as well as normality in all expressions of religion. “There is actually a continuum between the problematic and the unproblematic aspects of all religious collectivities”. While discussing what would make ‘cults’ appear to be ‘normal’, Beckford offers interesting directions for a change in focus aside from beliefs contents. Pragmatic, policy necessities may be the external criteria implicitly or explicitly applied: “...[T]olerance is extended these days to NRM’s which satisfy various non-religious conditions imposed by state authorities”.

Of all dimensions of Public Space-Building, the most manifest is undoubtedly the one linked to public debate. In Part two, readers are invited to cover the ground, if not make the journey, from ‘Personal Experience to Public Controversy’. Roland Campiche first provides some comprehensive perspective on media construction of religious phenomena, conceived as sociocultural regulation. Beyond the “lieux communs” on media coverage, he initially seeks to circumscribe its singular impact on religions: for example, extending to religions a social necessity for easily identifiable leadership, and enforcing on them the need to generate events, a theme later on illustrated in Palmer’s contribution. Campiche then insists on a more nuanced analysis of media regulation, and provides a few assumptions for better grounded research. There is no central regulator in the field of religion, it is assumed. Moreover, sociocultural impact of media regulation varies, with greater impact on sects than on established religions as way of general rule. Media also play a paradoxical role with relation to religion, coming to enforce some “religious correctness” in order to police a field more or less voluntarily deserted by its traditional actors.” And yet, Campiche concludes, the question of the cognitive influence exerted by the media on public perceptions of religion remains unanswered.

Better asserted is the impact media coverage of new religions has on public controversy, even on public policy. With the precision and clarity brought by acute and extensive knowledge of moral panics functioning, Massimo Introvigne shows how “public order” doctrines, and reference to mental manipulation, legitimize restrictions to religious liberties throughout contemporary Europe. Policy considerations are then provided by Introvigne with respect to the way public authorities could mediate religious controversies, such as criteria in the choice of narratives.
Religious liberty finds limits in the fundamental necessities of the common good but, he warns: "La liberté devient un fantôme lorsque, dans le conflit entre les récits concernant les mouvements religieux anciens et nouveaux, les autorités publiques décident de faire leurs récits de type hostile".

Those hostile narratives often feed "urban legends" on new religions, according to A. Bouchard. Special focus on media treatment of a group suicide of five members of the Order of the Solar Temple in St-Casimir (Québec), in 1997, allow the author to document the perception of sects as a non specific, yet insidious threat. More disturbing than the occurrence of these new urban legends, still, is their origin in what the author calls "a culture of denouncement", everywhere at play in the West with the politics of apostasy.

In "Ampushing the Apocalypse : Sects, Suicide and Stigma in the Media", Susan Palmer draws attention to the "complex symbiotic relationships between prophetic NRMs, the media and the anticult movement, and describe [s]ome of the mutually exploitative ‘deals’ that have been forged between prophets and journalists...". Of special interest are the unintended consequences sometimes fostered by media publicity: stimulation and validation of millenarian excitement, furthering agenda of media competent Prophets, even media intimidation by criminalized groups such as Aum Shinrikyo.

The most critical dimension of Public Space-Building, so far as the ever fundamental question of jurisdiction is concerned, is examined in a last section entitled: "Sacred Space, Contested Boundaries". How do existing patterns of regulation withstand the “creative destruction" of religious innovation and the fury of public controversy? First of all, what role is imparted to law? What structural and historical variables might be at play in comparative perspective? With a classical exercise in theory-building, James Richardson offers useful clues in trying to solve the genuine intellectual enigma of social control of religious innovation. He first discusses the interplay of structural variables such as pervasiveness of the law, autonomy of the legal system, access to legal system, religious diversity, and the way they relate to cultural variables such as the degree of religious freedom. Because religious diversity itself is such an historical force, he predicts that public resistance to it may mandate increasing resource allocation in the future, just to suppress those non state-sanctioned religious practices. This spiral is particularly visible in the case of former communist countries, and might yet be apparent in the milder forms of the “structured pluralism” present in Western Europe, where official production of lists evidences the development of a “hierarchy of
religions”. Richardson then illustrates internal operation of these variables with reference to evidentiary issues in the judicial system as they arise with the legal treatment of controversial groups. Judicial discretion in the admission of evidence, as well as the selective use of testimonies, are exemplified with reference to ‘cult-brainwashing’ cases.

Another useful perspective on the European situation, especially on the French case, is offered by Jean Baubérot. In a perceptive analysis of differing, when not divergent public “philosophies” on the question of religious pluralism, Baubérot helps understand what may be termed a “structural adaptation” crisis of existing patterns of regulation in France, instead of a crisis of the pluralist regime per se. French history witness to at least two distinct worldviews on the matter: one being “liberté de conscience”, which may translate into “freedom of religion”, and the other, “liberté de penser”, which may translate into “emancipation from religion through the use of reason and science”. According to Baubérot, the actual but coincidental prevalence of the latter, in the form of some “established laïcité”, may be in affinity with resistance to structural pluralism in France (witness, the growth of Islam) but, most of all, with the development of a “pensée unique”, on religion as well as on other subjects, at odds with the critical use of reason characteristic of the “laïque culture”.

Some actual ‘confluence of interests’ on the part of public regulators, concerned publics and anti-cult activists explains the current wide consensus on “cult bashing” in Europe. Public initiatives as they have developed over the last few years show that public regulation activism responds to systemic, but as well to incremental processes. The same may be thought of Public Space-Building in religion, usually related to non intervention and neutrality principles of public authorities, but as frequently found in direct relation to minority religions’ legal activism. One is reminded here of Max Weber’s technical acceptance of the term “sect” as a community of religiously qualified people, some of whom in necessity of defending freedom of conscience as a religious imperative. Jehovah’s Witnesses form a religious group which has exemplified this incremental process in the last decades. Some of these legal battles are here recounted by two Witness attorneys, A. Carbonneau and C. Wah. In the first instance, Carbonneau documents an uphill battle in Quebec that actually opened a religious public space in this Canadian province. Today, Carbonneau and Wah argue, religious and public territories are still disputed in other highly charged and publicised court battles such as blood transfusion and child custody cases. General publics would no doubt agree that notions such as “the Best Interest of the Child” need to be correctly
asserted in courts, with proper fact finding and competent evaluation. Yet, in Wah’s terms: “Despite the lip service paid to tolerance and mutual respect, the plain truth is that many new and minority religions with their own holidays or religious practices may be considered as different or non-traditional, and are therefore, presumed to be harmful to children. Some custody evaluators and trial judges feel that they can no longer take a neutral or impartial position on questions of religious training when religious training is at the heart of the dispute.”

The specter of the “Battle of the gods” envisioned by Weber may still be looming, but only as long as a “conviction ethic” in reasoning is privileged over a “consequential ethic”. In a concluding chapter, I offer some speculation on Public Space-Building in the context of globalization. With reference to regimes of religious regulation, an attempt is made to identify some key factors in religious public space expansion and contraction. Expansion, no doubt, is favoured by peaceful coexistence of religions and tolerance, generalized exchange brought by civil liberties, the growth of a religious market, all features of the pluralization process in religion. But there is also evidence on the world stage today of a co-occurring “authentification of religion” process, which is particularly visible in the public construction of a religious sector. Public sector building of this type emerges and prospers, it seems, at the interface of Welfare States and Nation States prerogatives. The “status politics of religion” it induces generally result in public space contraction for religions, more pronounced in the case of frontier religions, as is illustrated with reference to the sect controversy in Europe. But overall, the complexity of Public Space-Building in religion makes for fragile certainties, unforeseen developments, and many challenges still for analysts.

NOTES

1. Under the auspices of the Department of Religious Studies. The editor wishes to express her gratitude to the Department chair, Marie-Andrée Roy.

Other participants in the ‘Groupe’ and the seminar were: Raymond Lemieux, from the Faculty of Theology and Sciences of Religion, who made a presentation on religious innovation, and graduate students and researchers: Sylvain Nadeau, Nadia Gilbert, Martin Grégoire, Julie Trajot, Iolande Cadri, Rossignol. In addition to their suggestions and comments, the editor greatly benefited from Sylvain Nadeau and Alexandru Gura’s assistance in editing this collection.
Public-space-building in religion: A multidimensional phenomenon

2. As opposed to a metaphorical, mythical, or idealized acceptance. Cf. Craig J. Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992. For a review of critiques addressed to Habermas' notion, as well as an original perspective of its potential in light of communication technology advances, see Radu Dobrescu, "Une théorie unifiée de l'espace-temps public?" Department of Political Science, Laval University, 2001 (rbdxh@lycos.com).

3. One expression used by J.A. Schumpeter in relation to entrepreneurial capitalism.

4. What political analysts would refer to as crisis in the regime, as opposed to crisis on the pluralist regime of religious regulation.
