

The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam

Armando Salvatore

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A shortened version of his 2005 Habilitation thesis at Humboldt University, Berlin, this ambitious book both leans on and disagrees with German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the authoritative western theorist on the public sphere and communicative action. Salvatore applauds how Habermas created an original synthesis between the idea of civil society developed in the Anglo-American tradition and the more radical version of “civic virtue” in the European republican tradition emanating from Immanuel Kant. Habermas has masterfully wedded his theories of the public sphere and communicative action in such a way that “the only secure way to vindicate public reason is identified with a democratic process” (p. 240).

A great achievement, no doubt, but at what cost? Salvatore sees this theory of the public sphere as condemned to an impasse. The “Habermas effect” has three main weaknesses: (1) it ultimately rests on the shaky ground of private trust; (2) its theory is limited to a western view of the self and citizenship and, in the end, to the reach of a hegemonic western culture; and (3) this limitation leaves out the all-pervasive dynamic of religious traditions in most other parts of the world.

In fact, “religious tradition” has captured the heart of Salvatore’s impressive work since the early 1990s. With his feet in two universities in Germany (Humboldt and Essen) and one in Italy (L’Orientale school of the University of Naples), Salvatore is emerging as the most creative and wide-ranging theoretician of the sociology of contemporary Islam. This book brings him full circle since the English publication of his dissertation in 1997 (*Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*), being an in-depth reworking of his original thesis. In between, he has continued to hone his study of how Muslim traditions have developed in time and in various locales, and, in particular, how they have been affected by their confrontation with western traditions of modernity. As the editor of the *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* and a member of several joint projects in Europe, Salvatore has enriched his research by collaborating with other scholars in editing four books, including the forthcoming *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates* (Muhammad Khalid Masud and Martin van Bruinessen, coeditors).

This biographical detour was necessary, if only to prepare the reader for a densely argued and largely theoretical work. After two readings, mostly because I am not conversant with the latest in sociological theory, I have come away from *The Public Sphere* with a deep appreciation for Salvatore's ability to gather important insights from various disciplines (sociology, anthropology, history, religious and Islamic studies, philosophy, and political science) and press them into the service of a wide angle theory of comparative sociology of the public sphere.

Having said this, however, the reader looking for applications in particular contemporary settings will be disappointed. This is about the "genealogy" of the public sphere concept – contesting how Habermas and his western predecessors traced its origins in order to dig deeper and wider by using four principal tools: (1) Axial theory (the literature that developed from the writings of philosopher Karl Jaspers); (2) Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of a living tradition (and much of his "genealogical" work); (3) the seminal work of early modern Italian scholar Giambattista Vico. Here, contra MacIntyre, a tradition-based approach is not incompatible with a Nietzschean-Foucauldian use of genealogy – only genealogy will be conducted according to Vico's method, which highlights the twists and turns, the ruptures and continuities of concepts and practices from pagan Greco-Roman traditions to the dawn of modernity; and (4), as said above, Salvatore still finds much inspiration in Habermas.

The title includes both "Catholicism" and "Islam." Salvatore does not disappoint. Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to those topics, respectively: "The Public Reason of the Commoner" and "The Public Pursuit of Public Will." But his excavation work in both cases is guided by the Axial trajectory in the Euro-Mediterranean civilizational gambit traced in the preceding chapters. This social and intellectual history displays three major breakthroughs: (1) around 500 BCE Plato aided the transition from a debate on one city-state's common good with an emphasis on simply rhetoric to a linking of democratic debate to higher-level values that would be universally applicable (introducing "transcendence," a concept later recycled in Christian and Muslim debates about the triadic bond of *ego*, *alter*, and *Alter* [God]); (2) "the renaissance of this Axial framework of social interaction and communication ... in the late Middle Ages" (p. 2); and (3), the early Enlightenment period (1650-1750), with Vico as chief representative.

Chapter 3, then, traces the trajectory of Latin Christendom, which, while building on its Roman law and Greco-Roman philosophical heritage, began to rework Augustine's ideal of the *respublica christiana* (the ideal Christian

commonwealth) through Thomas Aquinas' quasi-sociological insight regarding the "triangular partnership of faith between ego and alter mediated by their voluntary and trustful faith in God and facilitated by the apprehension of the highest good" (p. 116). Now too the Aristotelian *telos* (the life purpose) is revived in Christian fashion and, through practical rationality, individuals' patterns of life lead into "a collective endeavor that becomes manifest as public reason" (p. 120). Along with the social impact of the monastic movement, and the Franciscans in particular, come the growth of a civic spirit and the empowerment of "commoners" in a new urban public arena.

As seen in Richard Bulliet's *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (2004), the simultaneous mushrooming of mystical life in community happened in the same period for Muslims and Christians: the Axial Renaissance (the High Medieval Period). Yet much more than in any other Abrahamic context, the Islamic emphasis on "moral-practical guidance and legal adjudication" empowered the lay specialists in Islamic law. Moreover, since the use of *ijtihad* and *ijma`* were never fully institutionalized, a dynamic of practical, legal, and public reasoning was able to blossom in a variety of schools and settings. But for Salvatore, it was the Andalusí jurist al-Shatibi who truly brought the Islamic legal tradition to a climax by focusing on the common weal (*maṣlahah*) as a purpose of the Shari`ah (*telos* again) and prepared it for the modern transition.

Readers will disagree with a detail here and there in Salvatore's reading of the Islamic branch of the Axial Renaissance, but most will agree with me, I believe, that contemporary sociological theory, as well as discussions about democracy, religion, and secularism in a variety of global contexts, will be greatly enriched by his emphasis on tradition and the contribution, both past and present, of prophetic discourse in the public sphere.

David L. Johnston
 Adjunct Lecturer, Religious Studies Department
 University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
 Theology Department
 St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia