

Paradoxing the secular in Latin America:
Religion, gender and sexuality at the crossroads

Juan Marco Vaggione¹

Abstract

The strong influence of secularization theory has produced simplified conceptualizations of religion that, when analyzing gender and sexuality, overlooks important sociopolitical dynamics generating crucial paradoxes. Considering the existence of citizen organizations articulating counter-doctrinal theologies, this article suggests that a post-secular understanding of the public sphere is a valid path for overcoming gender and sexuality inequalities not only within the Catholic Church but also in society at large. These organizations reinscribe core religious values with pluralist understanding of gender and sexuality bypassing, at least factually, the authoritarian structure of the Church while, at the same time, publicly circulating religious narratives confronting doctrinal patriarchy and heteronormativity.

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Introduction

Feminist and Gay-Lesbian scholars have valuably contributed to the debates about the public/private dichotomy. It was through des/re-articulating this dichotomy that the limitations of socio-political analyses were shown and the politicization of 'new' identities created. In particular, they unmasked how the assigned private role of gender and sexuality functions as an ideological frame structuring inequalities. The liberal model of a pre-set private sphere² was, precisely, the main theoretical construct feminist and gay-lesbian scholars criticized in order to include gender and sexuality as two main dimensions of inequalities in academic and political agendas³. Gender and sexuality needed to be liberated from the liberal closet of the private realm for relations of power and domination to become visible.

Although Feminist and Gay-Lesbian scholars moved away from the liberal distinction between public/private, when dealing with religion they uncritically reproduced it. The theoretical apparatuses built to disjoin and blur the frontiers between public/private become rigid when analyzing religion. The need to confront the patriarchal and heteronormative⁴ substratum of religious doctrines reinforced the liberal distinction uncritically accepting religion as belonging to the private realm. For gender and sexuality to be publicly re-inscribed religion has to be privatized.

However, religion has evaded the liberal barriers surviving in multiple and complex ways obscured by secularist assumptions. Mainly considering Latin America, I want to propose in this article that the endurance of religion as an identity dimension and the complex

² Also included in authors such as Habermas. For a critique of a liberal and Habermasian conception of the public sphere see Fraser (1992) and Benhabib (1992).

³ When I refer to gender/sexuality inequalities I am considering Fraser's neo-Weberian approach of misrecognition as status subordination, in the sense that certain communities are "prevented from participating as a peer in social life" (Fraser, 1997). The institutionalization of these social and cultural norms has different levels of formality, from more juridified (codification) to more informal social practices at the level of civil society. I also agree with Fraser that although it is possible to analytically distinguish misrecognition as a particular type of injustice, it is intrinsically connected to class inequalities. See Fraser's concept of bivalent community.

⁴ Although there are many ways of presenting the kind of misrecognition suffered by homosexual persons, I prefer the term heteronormativity, as a sense of rightness associated to heterosexuality. Specifically, it has been defined as "the constitution of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership" (Berlant and Warner, 1998).

manners in which the Catholic Church publicly intervenes should be taken seriously, thus forcing us to revisit some secularist assumptions still permeating many socio-political analyses. I present some paradoxes created by secularization arguing that a post-secular understanding of the public, in addition to accepting the factual role of religion in contemporary societies, could be useful for reducing the influence of conservative religious sectors and for privileging democratic conceptions of gender and sexuality. Although counter-intuitive this article suggests that is not by privatizing religion that its patriarchal and homophobic components can be reduced but by fully including it in public debates.

Paradoxing the secular

Secularization has been defined in many ways but, in general, it aims to describe the declining influence of religion as a result of modernity⁵. Collapsing empirical and normative elements and also collapsing different dimensions, this theory permeates the majority of social theorizing placing religion at the margins, if placed at all. The affinity between secularization, as a normative enterprise, and pro-feminist and pro-gay positions is obvious. Patriarchy and heteronormativity are encapsulated in the 'traditional' conception of family very much enforced by the majority of mainstream religions⁶. At an individual level, religiosity⁷ and religious denominations are crucial independent variables when analyzing patriarchal and homophobic attitudes⁸. When considering civil society, religious institutions, in particular the Catholic Church, articulate public interventions, create specific pro-family organizations and lobby the state against feminist and

⁵ This can be observed in some of the classic concepts within sociology, such as rationalization (Berger, 1967) or the disenchantment of the world (Weber) or individualization (Bellah et al 1985) or Durkheim's secular "civil religion".

⁶ Religion is the "major cultural reinforcer of modern industrial patriarchy" (Briggs, 1987: 408). For a summary of different denominations (Christian and non-Christian) toward homosexuality see: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/>. For a general literature review of the ways in which Catholic Church, doctrine and popular religion (specifically *marianismo*) perpetuate women's subordination in Latin America see Drogus (1997) and Goldsmit and Sweeney (1988).

⁷ Religiosity, in this context, refers to the strength of religious beliefs that empirically can be measured of many different ways, from service attendance to how important are religious beliefs in one's life. In general, the analysis confirm that the stronger the religious beliefs the stronger the rejection of abortion and homosexuality.

⁸ Lista (1994), Vaggione (1998), Gay (1996), Cook et al, and Woodrum and Davison (1992); Hunter (1983). It must be noted that there are analysis showing that although these associations exist it has reduced its significance in the last twenty years (Petersen et al, 1998).

gay/lesbian rights and demands⁹. Furthermore, the transnational existence of the Catholic Church and its special status at the UN has facilitated a centralized role in maintaining traditional definitions of gender and sexuality vis-à-vis the transnational feminist and gay/lesbian movements¹⁰. This antagonism, articulating two opposite definitions of gender and sexuality, has reinforced secularization as the assumed path for reducing gender/sexuality inequalities¹¹.

However, in the last decade some debates have shown that religion has not followed the pattern assumed by secularization theory¹². First, contrary to predictions, people have not declined their religious identities. Western Europe, the paradigmatic example, has proven to be an exception when compared with USA and Latin America. It is astonishing to observe how stable religious identifications have been in the last hundred years and how insignificant the number of non-believers is. Some changes have occurred in the Latin American religious market, such as the increase of Protestantism¹³, but the percentage of people without religious beliefs has remained stable¹⁴. So, a first paradox that needs to be taken seriously is that the global spread of feminist and pro-gay/lesbian identities has not been accompanied, at least in Latin America, by a decline in religious beliefs. On the

⁹ There are many civil society organizations 'defending' the religious principles against feminism and gay and lesbian movements. Among them, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Right (see Dillon, 1999; Weaver and Appleby, 1995); Catholic United for the Faith (see Sullivan, 1995); Women for Faith and Family (Hitchcock, 1995). For relationship between the state, the Catholic Church and pro-life groups in the Argentinean case, see Gutierrez et al (1998).

¹⁰ Together with some Muslim countries. See Sabom (1999).

¹¹ It is possible to understand the relationship between the Church and feminist and gay and lesbian movements in the logic proposed by Mouffe, influenced by Schmitt, of the we/them relationship (Mouffe, 1993). These movements articulated their conception of gender and sexuality distinguishing them from the proposed by religious doctrines (the constitutive outside). A similar logic can be observed when organized religions articulate their traditional family defense against feminist and gay-lesbian movements.

¹² The Journal Sociology of Religion dedicates a whole number to discuss the 'health' of secularization thesis (Volume 60 # 3). It is possible to find two extreme positions: post and neo secularists according to how much they retain or reject the secularist thesis. I am in agreement with those authors affirming that while secularization should not be completely rejected some of its aspects need to be refashioned (Casanova, 1994; Connolly, 1999).

¹³ In Latin America, even the increase of religious pluralism has been associated with a strengthening of the Catholic Church (Gill, 1999: 18).

¹⁴ The percentage of people without religious beliefs has not increased importantly between 1900-1980 (Parker, 1996). According to him there are 0.7% of atheists and 4.0% of non-believers in Latin America. It is interesting to note that these percentages are not associated with urbanization, industrialization or level of education in the countries (Parker, 1996:99). Specifically in Argentina, Gallup reported the existence of 4% of atheists; 12% non-religious people; 83% religious from which 84% are Catholics (see www.gallup.com.ar)

contrary, religion remains a crucial identity dimension, one that coexists with homodesire and the rights to one's own body in more sophisticated and creative ways than the secular/religious antagonism can capture.

Secondly, and contrary to predictions as well, religion has permeated the public sphere and not necessarily in an anti-modern or anti-democratic way. In some countries, such as Brazil or Chile, it has been an important counter-authoritarian force in the transition to democracy articulating a voice and a social space against human right violations¹⁵. Once democracy is already established, the Catholic Church continues playing some crucial public interventions, such as reinforcing human rights discourses, providing protection to individuals in contexts of state impossibility -illegal immigrants or economically deprived citizens-, articulating a social justice discourse against neo-liberal models, or favoring processes of dialogue among socio-political actors. This public visibility has converted the church into the most believable institution in all Latin American countries¹⁶. Paradoxically, the "same" Church that incarnates a fundamentalist position toward gender and sexuality is also the one that publicly intervenes favoring democracy, denouncing class exclusions or articulating public dialogue. Although a strong secularization would label any public role of religion in a negative way, the public interventions of the Catholic Church cannot be fully captured by the progressive/conservative or democratic/anti-democratic dichotomies.

Finally, the strong and quasi-paradigmatic influence of secularization theory created a tendency toward the 'sacralization' of the secular. It cannot be denied that the switch from the church regulating morality to the state integrating a plurality of ethics is a basic democratic step. However, it should also be recognized that sometimes secularization is just a process of translation reproducing, in a different language, similar codes to those generated and sustained by religious traditions. Although secularization is an important alternative in reducing religious influences, it could create the opposite consequence if uncritically sustained: to freeze a religious ethics under a secular language, to sacralize the

¹⁵ However, the Catholic Church in Argentina was a close ally of the military regime (Mignone, 1986; Burdick, 1995).

secular¹⁷. Furthermore, the Church has a long history of articulating religious beliefs with secular and rational discourses. Homosexuality and abortion are presented not only as sinful because of theological interpretations but also contrary to the 'common good' because of rational arguments. The Church managed to articulate religious and secular languages in a kind of bilingualism that empowered its position. A third paradox is that the frontiers between the religious and the secular are not as clear and neat as the secularization theory seems to assume. On the contrary, religious denominations master secular discourses in order to oppose homodesire and abortion. God is easily harmonized with reason. To secularize sexual ethics, although crucial in some respects, does not necessarily represent a substantial change. Secularization can also bring the reproduction of religious based values though in a different language.

If religion has a public role in contemporary societies, a role that cannot be reduced to an anti-modernist or anti-democratic one, socio-political theorizing should take religion seriously. It is necessary, then, to overcome the general tendency of 'progressive' thinking to reinforce an antagonism between the religious and the secular, an antagonism that produces a homogenization and invisibility of religious influences and '*sacralizes*' secularization in a rather uncritical manner. If any public role of religion is considered, by definition, the manifestation of an anti-modern tendency, the complexity of religion is underscored and the differences between public religion and fundamentalist positions blurred. Secularization is still a valid and legitimate way of confronting gender and sexuality inequalities but it is imperative to face the centrality of religion in contemporary societies and examine the potentialities of religious alternatives of targeting patriarchy and heteronormativity.

¹⁶ In 2001, CIMA carried out a comparative study of 15 Latin American countries concluding that the Catholic Church is the most trusted institution (71% of surveyed people has confidence in the Catholic Church). For a summary of the research see www.gallup.com.ar

¹⁷ Let me exemplify with two main demands: abortion and same-sex marriage. To reduce opposition to abortion to the role played by the Catholic Church is only to understand part of the phenomenon. It is correct that many people oppose pro-abortion legislation based on their religious beliefs, but there is also an important percentage of people basing their opposition to abortion on 'secularized' values, such as the right of unborn child. Even more, the existing legislation justifying the prohibition of abortion in Latin America uses a complete secular language. In a similar way we can consider the gay/lesbian fights for same-sex marriages. Although Christian doctrines have a key role in opposing this possibility, it can not be forgotten that a set of secularized values, guaranteed by the State, do also resist the possibility of same-sex marriages arguing the risk of societal disintegration.

Reinscribing religious visibility

For anybody who confronted religious influences as a way of overcoming patriarchy or heteronormativity to witness the increasing importance of religion would immediately feel as a drawback in the march toward social equalities. An immediate, almost intuitive reaction would be to articulate an anti-religious discourse reinforcing secularization and propelling religion into the private. However, the economical and political crisis plus the high legitimacy of the Church reassure its public presence in the region. The challenge, I think, is not to insist on the 'privatization' of religion but to analyze the potentialities that religion being in the public could bring in confronting gender and sexuality inequalities. For doing so, it is necessary to revisit some secularist assumptions running through many socio-political theoretical corpuses and to bracket the 'visceral reactions' that religious generates.

A crucial distinction, when considering the public role of religion, is between church/state separation and the privatization of religion¹⁸. The separation between church and state, the most salient aspect of secularization reinforced by theories of democracy, is also the least controversial one because even the Catholic Church has accepted state separation as a core element of its functioning in contemporary societies. The Church, since the Vatican II (1962-5) became a society-centered institution. However, to affirm that the Catholic Church has normatively chosen state separation does not mean that it is a completed process. On the contrary, there are many instances where the separation becomes blurred. Many constitutions in Latin America still provide the Catholic Church with a special status that, sometimes, violates the basic understandings of church/state separation¹⁹.

However, the separation between church and state does not necessarily imply the privatization of religion. On the contrary, this separation is a prerequisite for the public role

¹⁸ I base this distinction on Casanova (1994).

¹⁹ Many constitutions in Latin America incorporated a special status for the Catholic Church, either as an 'official religion' or requiring the president to be Catholics. However constitutional amendments are reducing the special status of the Catholics Church tuning the legal system with a more open religious market. Also religious languages are used, in judicial decisions, to justify the rejection of women or gay/lesbian rights.

of religion in contemporary societies²⁰. Ironically, the disentanglement from the state is a central variable for explaining not only religious survival but also its increasing importance in some contemporary societies. This disentanglement allowed the Catholic Church to become a key actor in civil society playing a variety of roles from generating dense social networks, more participatory individuals and militant leaders²¹ to providing organizations that constitute the backbone of civil societies, such as the Comunidades Eclesiales de Base²², welfare organizations and pro-human rights groups. Powerless states, illegitimate political societies and immense economic inequalities have reinforced, in Latin America, the centrality and legitimacy of the Church²³. The Catholic Church and its organizations become core instances articulating, simultaneously at the transnational, national and local level, a counter liberal discourse of social justice and representing and providing welfare to the economically excluded sectors. This time, the church's public intervention has become a crucial part of civil society²⁴, not through the state or political society. It is not only as a means of 'spiritual' salvation but also as a manner of earthly survival that people's identification with religion is maintained.

The role of the Catholic Church can be evaluated in many ways but one thing is clear: the church can go public without violating its separation from the state. This public role of religion also implies the acceptance of the democratic game. Religious narratives are publicly articulated and become debatable material not only by secular groups but also by those who, being religious, do not agree with some aspects of the official doctrine. Although a religion in the public represents a more powerful and legitimized organization, it is also forced to become a more democratic one, allowing, whether voluntary or not,

²⁰ See Casanova (1994) and Wood (1999).

²¹ These types of analyses are in the line of Tocquevillean analyses. Foley and Edwards (1996); Belah et al (1985). For Latin America see Levine and Stoll (1997). For an alternative account of these phenomena, using the concept of public sphere of civil society see Casanova (1994) concept of de-privatization of religion.

²² see Levine (1992)

²³ The increase of economic exclusions in Latin America, the most unequal region in the world, has reinforced the strong presence of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis the critical situation of the state and political society. The state has lost its welfare and interventionist features reducing its capacity to articulate an alternative to neo-liberal policies. The political society, on the one hand, is characterized by an extreme crisis of legitimacy that generated a void in representation and produced that the Church ranked as the only institution with a certain level of legitimacy among the population, together with mass media.

²⁴ See Casanova (1994) for a detailed analysis of these processes.

debates and disagreements²⁵. This possibility becomes crucial when considering the quasi-monopolistic status of the Catholic Church in Latin America and its authoritarian internal functioning. The Catholic Church, although appearing as a homogeneous and centralized organization, has important 'internal' differences and opposite theological standpoints. A strong secularized position would force those 'theological' debates out of the public²⁶, coinciding, ironically, with the most conservative sectors within the church that have instructed these theological disputes to be kept private and out of public debates²⁷. In a way, secularization of the public sphere is functional to the more conservative religious sectors aiming to avoid open debates about its official doctrine and to resolve those disagreements by internal 'non-democratic' logic. If secularization historically emerged to avoid bloody interreligious wars, now secularization is, in some ways, covering intradenominational disagreements; disagreements that could be crucial in propelling religious changes.

Although counterintuitive, I would like to hypothesize that to revert patriarchalism and heteronormativity, sustained among others by the Catholic Church, it is better to allow religious languages to be publicly articulated and debated. If we reduce public debates to 'secularized' languages and justifications we are reducing the potentialities of public debates. The Catholic Church has shown that to secularize a religious language is not a problem when sustaining patriarchy and heteronormativity and that a secularized public sphere prevents internal disagreements from being publicly articulated. Although it sounds paradoxical, while it is important to reinforce the secularization of the state through strengthening church separation and avoiding religious discourses as part of legal regulations it is also necessary to de-secularize the public sphere allowing those same discourses to circulate; to out religion from the assigned private sphere. In a context where the big majority of the population identifies as catholic, the public circulation, beyond the

²⁵ See Casanova (1994).

²⁶ Although secularism and liberalism are closely connected they are distinguishable (Connolly, 1999: 10). Habermas also has a 'secularized' conception of the public; according to Schussler Fiorenza (1992) he does not envision theology as communicative and as capable of mutually critical dialogue.

²⁷ "catholic theologians...are to be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church as authentic interpreter of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition" (Revised Code of Canon Law by John Paul II in 1983; Canon 812). See also the Vatican's Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (1990) "theologians should avoid turning to the mass media". See Dillon (1999) for a summary of these documents.

wall of the church, of alternative theologies debating the official doctrine has enormous potentialities for a democratization of gender and sexuality conceptualizations. People still speak and inhabit religious languages, so while secularizing those languages is a possible path, the public existence of religious discourses countering homophobia or patriarchy could be an even more revolutionary alternative.

Theological de(re)constructions of the official Catholic doctrine²⁸, many times overseen by 'secular' progressive approaches, are powerful elements for any kind of theorizing about gender and sexuality in the Latin American contexts. First, they show that the contemporary church's position towards abortion and same-sex sexuality has not always been the same, revealing the temporality of doctrinal elements²⁹. At the same time, these alternative theologies break the assumption of 'a unique' catholic doctrine demonstrating the existence of important fractures and different ways of being catholic. Second, these theological debates reshape key social institutions, such as the family, with an incredible potentiality that, for example, not only breaks with heterosexuality but also uses the model of gay sexual communities as a normative model for contemporary families³⁰. If we consider that important secular sectors of the gay/lesbian movements have quickly accommodated to the 'traditional' definition of family, including same-sex desire, just as another possibility but without confronting the institution of marriage itself, some of these theological debates, although religious, reshape contemporary understanding of the family in more radical ways. Thirdly, the strong influence of liberation theology in Latin America produced that considerations about gender and sexuality are being done in close connection with economic exclusion. In this sense, different type of oppressions, such as poverty, woman or sexual minorities, appear interconnected³¹. Finally, theological debates are eroding a key argument of the official church: that the process of secularization is to blame for the increased lack of 'morality' in contemporary societies as a result of feminist

²⁸ Either Catholic or of other denominations.

²⁹ There are also historical accounts, such as Boswell (1980), showing how early medieval Christians did not regulate homosexual behavior; on the contrary, they celebrated same sex unions (Boswell, 1994). Furthermore, the church doctrine toward abortion has not been stable (Connery, 1977).

³⁰ Rudy (1997), for example, uses a model of gay sexuality as a way of reformulating the contemporary Christian concept of family.

³¹ See Hank (2002) as an example of these interconnections under the concept of 'oppression'.

positions and homosexuality. These theologies while reinforcing a religious discourse at the same time make it compatible with homodesire and feminist conceptions of the body.

Catholics for a free choice: genderized souls

...to understand that the bishops did not speak for Catholics and that Catholics could and did support the right to choose (CFFC President Frances Kissling)

The existence, at the level of civil society, of religious organizations aiming to confront and change patriarchy and heteronormativity in religious official doctrines is not a new phenomenon³². Contrary to more antagonistic views, these religious communities function as 'free social spaces' for certain marginalized groups, such as women and homosexuals, to get together and organize in demanding for recognition and equality, not only within the denomination but also within society at large³³. Specifically within the Catholic Church there are several pro-change groups³⁴ -such as Dignity, Women's Ordination Conference, Association for the Rights of Catholics within the Church, Catholics Speak out, and Catholics for a Free Choice - aiming to redefine some aspects of the catholic doctrine while affirming their identification as Catholics.

Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) is a very interesting case for illuminating the potentialities of these groups when combating gender and sexuality inequalities. CFFC is an independent, non-profit organization engaged in education and advocacy on issues of gender equality, women rights and reproductive health. It was created in USA in 1973 to articulate a pro-choice catholic position and to offer an alternative voice to that of the hierarchy³⁵. Following the trends toward transnationalization, both as a general phenomenon and specifically for the Catholic Church under John Paul II, CFFC, in 1987,

³² Since the 60s and 70s, firstly in USA and later in Latin American, several groups and organizations emerged very much influenced by feminism and gay-lesbian movements

³³ These groups can either be part of an existing religious denomination -such as Integrity in the Episcopal Church; Lutheran Concerned or Good news in Evangelical Churches or constitute new denominations. Metropolitan Community Churches are an example of this. They were created, particularly, to serve the 'spiritual' needs of gay/lesbian feeling of expulsion from other denominations. Greely (1997); Viera Machado (1993); Warner (1993); Wood and Bloch (1995). For Latin American there are some studies showing the role of the Catholic Church in triggering the emergence of women's movements (Alvarez, 1990).

³⁴ See Dillon (1999) and Manning (1997) for a detailed analysis of some of these pro-change groups.

³⁵ Precisely, one of the most effective campaigns was a full page advertisement in The New York Times asserting that "a Diversity of Opinions Regarding Abortion Exists Among Committed Catholics."

chose a representative in Latin America and held a symposium for Latin American Catholic women³⁶. Due to this transnationalization, women with similar concerns in Latin America came to know CFFC activities and decided to create 'sister-organizations' in countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru³⁷.

CFFC provides public narratives where a catholic identity appears integrated with certain feminist standpoints such as abortion, reproductive rights and desire. CFFC retains the core identity of the Catholic Doctrine, though reinscribed with a different understanding of gender and sexuality, basing their integrative position on counter-doctrinal theologian interpretations³⁸. This integration, although contrary to the antagonism articulated by the Catholic Church and feminist and gay-lesbian movements, reflects a tendency followed by important sectors of the population who integrate, in multiples and creative ways, their religious identities with a more egalitarian conception of gender and sexuality³⁹. Because power relations and pre-existing repertoires strongly shape individuals choices⁴⁰, the role of CFFC publicly articulating an integrated narrative is crucial for people aiming to maintain their religious identity consistently with a more egalitarian definition of gender.

The mission of CFFC is not only to propose an integrative project between religious identity and feminist position, but also to articulate their proposal in an antagonistic way with the fundamentalism on gender and sexuality sustained by the official Catholic Church. In this sense, the different CFFCs have organized 'transnational' and 'national' campaigns confronting the Catholic Church and presenting counter-official Catholic alternatives. At a transnational level, CFFC is leading an international campaign to prevent

³⁶ See Kissling (1995: 55).

³⁷ The existing organizations in Latin American, known as "Catolicas por el Derecho a Decidir", although present important similarities with CFFC are autonomous institutions nucleated by a Latin American network.

³⁸ Theologians such as Mary Hunt, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Daniel Maguiere (Dillon, 1999).

³⁹ D'Antonio (1994). Yip (1997); Thumma (1991); O'Brien (1991). selective Catholicism' (quote) (religious syncretism).

⁴⁰ In this respect I agree with the many authors indicating that although it is important to recognize the centrality of discourses and narratives it is also crucial to connect them with agency (see, as an example, Somers and Gibson, 1994).

the Vatican conserving its privileged status as a Non-member State Permanent Observer⁴¹ forcing it to participate in the UN like all other religious organizations, i.e. non-governmental organization. Another interesting public intervention is the first global campaign to end Catholic Bishop's ban on condoms. It involves the simultaneous publication, in different cities around the world, of denouncements against catholic bishop manifestations and lobbying against pro-condoms campaigns. At national levels, the existing CFFCs target the state favoring feminist or gay-lesbian rights and intervene on civil society, in particular popular sectors, with educational campaign about sexual health and reproductive rights⁴². In summary, while CFFC integrates a catholic identity with a democratic definition of gender/sexuality maintains, at the same time, an antagonism with the Church fundamentalist position on those issues. Although these organizations claim a catholic identity and the right to substantiate it, they antagonize with the Church hierarchy in even more confrontational ways than secular sectors.

Conclusions

Latin America presents a series of characteristics where the insistence on a strong secularization and privatization of religion could bring the missing of a central political cleavage for reversing heteronormativity and patriarchy. The majority of the population has a religious identity, contrary to the strong secularization *a la* Western Europe, but without a pluralist religious market *a la* USA. In Latin America, Catholicism has a quasi-monopolistic position and, together with language, is a key element in considering the region as an 'imagined community'. People are not dropping their religious identities. So, to conceive gender and sexuality without considering its (dis) encounters with religious identities is to isolate dynamics that, in most cases, take place in an intertwined manner.

No doubts a more democratic understanding of gender and sexuality in Latin America would require a religious change. Although secularism is a political project with important

⁴¹ This is an exceptional situation because no other religion has this peculiar status; they usually participate as non-governmental organizations. .

⁴² This situation is more crucial in Latin American countries where the Catholic Church is the most powerful religion organization and has an important and pervasive influence.

potentialities in reducing gender/sexuality inequalities, the profusion of intradenominational debates would benefit from non-secularized ways of targeting those inequalities. The Catholic Church, in particular, is not a democratic organization, however, there are crucial disagreements that, though not reflected in the official doctrine, characterize the Church as a pluralistic institution in spite of itself. To consider these disagreements as private is to restrict the potentialities they have in democratizing gender and sexuality not only within the Church but also in society at large. On the contrary, to publicize these internal debates can imply the publicization of alternative narratives to the official Doctrine; narratives that integrate religious beliefs with less oppressive definitions of gender and sexuality; narratives democratizing Catholicism through bypassing its authoritarian leadership. Religion should not be considered the 'constitutive outside' of a democratic definition of gender and sexuality. The 'constitutive outside' of any democratic attempt favoring gender and sexuality should be the Church fundamentalist positions and secularization is not necessarily the only way to combat them; on the contrary, a forced secularization can be a fruitful arena in preserving the status-quo. There is also religious resistance; resistance that subverts fundamentalist conceptions while retaining the religious narratives. Disarming the antagonism between the religious and the secular would allow important alliances between different sectors confronting the fundamentalist positions of the Catholic Church toward gender and sexuality in more successful manners.

Finally, although paradoxical, I consider that from a normative standpoint a post-secular definition of the public aims to reinforce secularism as a politico/ideological possibility. The quasi-paradigmatic role of secularization theory becomes, in a sense, an emptying of secularization as an ideological position and as a political alternative. The assumed existence of secularism as the only legitimized voice for the public sphere has frozen the need to consider it as 'another' possibility in need of discussion, elaboration and confrontation. A post-secular understanding of the public does not mean the disappearance of secularization as an option; on the contrary, secularism becomes another alternative and, as such, in need of re-politicization. Secularized theorizing about gender and sexuality is a necessary dynamic element because, not corseted by any specific religious doctrine, has more analytical and political potentialities. If we 'de-sacralize' secularism and accept it as

another alternative in the public realm⁴³, secularism would stop being a pre-given and would be reestablished as a political program. Ironically, a post-secular understanding of the public would attribute even more importance to secularism as a public discourse.

⁴³ See Connolly (1999) for a throughout debate about the potentialities of considering secularism just another possibility in the public sphere.

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