RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS, RELIGIOUS INNOVATIONS AND
DENOMINATIONAL IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CITIES

José Casanova

Stadluft macht frei (City Air Makes Free)

This is an old medieval Germanic saying, grounded in the legal-political fact that following the medieval burgher revolutions, peasants who were able to stay for one year and one day within the protected walls of the city, gained freedom from feudal bondage. More broadly such a saying points to the liberation possibilities and the great opportunities which cities, particularly the large urban conglomerations which Georg Simmel called “metropolis” and we today would call global cities, tend to offer for individuals and groups to remake themselves and to start anew. But as in Marx’s analysis of the dialectics of “free wage labor” under the capitalist mode of production, “free” labor has the double connotation of being “freed” from servitude or bondage, but also that of being free to be bought and to be sold, which under capitalist conditions for those who own no other means of production than their labor power means the compulsion to have to sell one’s labor power on the market in order to survive.

It is crucial to maintain this dialectic ambiguity in mind when analyzing the dual process of liberation from old structures and the opportunity but also the compulsion to enter or create new ones which every process of urbanization entails, and more so than ever in our global cities. When it comes to religion, theories of urbanization grounded in theories of Western European secularization and modernization have tended to view only the moment of liberation from religious tradition and from religious bonds which the move to large cities may entail while ignoring the opportunities for religious innovations and individual and collective religious transformations and new community formations which cities may offer. This was clearly a shortsighted view based on an ideologically secularist and simplistic reading of processes of European urbanization in the 19th and 20th centuries which ignored the broader comparative historical experience and was fixated on a supposedly world-historical process of transition from “tradition” to “modernity” and from “Gemeinschaft” to “Gesellschaft” (Casanova 2011a).
Yet, as Max Weber himself had pointed out, all the great historical religious traditions were born in great urban centers and the continuous dynamics of religious innovation in all religious traditions found their natural space in cities rather than in the countryside. It is not by chance that “pagan” (paganus) meant originally simply “country bumpkin,” since at first within the Roman Empire one could only find Christians in urban centers. This which is true for ancient Christianity is equally true for the reform movements of Medieval Christianity, for the Protestant Reformation, for 18th century Pietism, for 19th century Evangelicalism, or for contemporary global Pentecostal Christianity, all were primarily urban phenomena. But the same would be true for Buddhism or for Islam, from their origins to the present.

It is undeniable, however, that much of the experience of modern Western European urbanization has been associated with radical secularization, expressed most succinctly in the famous statement of the leading post World War II French Catholic sociologist, Gabriel Le Bras, that the moment a French peasant sets foot in Paris’ Gare de Montparnasse, he stops going to church. Crucial was the fact that once one left behind the rural territorial parish, one not only ceased being a practicing Catholic in France, but one simply became irreligious. There was practically no alternative of being religious in any other way. Notwithstanding the existence of small Protestant and Jewish religious minorities the basic alternatives were to be either religiously Catholic or irreligiously secular.

Undoubtedly, the process of secularization throughout continental Europe is associated with the liberation from the confessional bonds of the territorial rural or urban parish and in this respect the process of secularization in Europe takes primarily the form of de-confessionalization (Casanova 2009). In the European context, secularization means above all liberation from confessional affiliations and identities, of the kind which were first determined by the previous process of religious and confessional territorialization across Europe that resulted from the post-Reformation religious civil wars and the imposition of the Westphalian principle cuius regio eius religio. This principle, moreover, was already institutionalized with the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain by the Catholic Kings in order to constitute a religiously homogeneous national territorial state.

Repeated ethno-religious cleansing and territorialized confessional religious boundaries have been two interrelated structural consequences of the dynamics of state formation in early modern Europe. Europe solved the problem of religious diversity through emigration, by expelling or by letting their religious minorities flee their home counties to find refuge first in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and then overseas. Northern Europe became homogeneously Protestant. Southern Europe became homogeneously Catholic. In between there emerged a bi-confessional buffer zone formed by Holland, Germany and Switzerland, where it became obvious that it was impossible or too costly to get rid of the large Catholic or Protestant minorities. Some form of modus vivendi developed, but usually based on similar principles of territorial confessionlization, cantonalization, or pillarization.

The principle of freedom of religion became institutionalized in Europe only much later, beginning in the 19th century and in many cases only after World War II with the incorporation of the individual principle of religious freedom into the UN Declaration of Human Rights. One could argue that implicit in the freedom, i.e. compulsion of religious minorities to emigrate was the emergence of the modern conception of religion as something which cannot be imposed or coerced and which individuals carry with them, in their private consciences. It is this modern sectarian and secular principle which was to gain full institutionalization first in those American colonies, where some of the radical Protestant sects, such as Quakers and Baptists, became influential minorities, and eventually after independence in the entire United States with the extension of the dual clause of the First Amendment, protecting the no establishment of religion at the state level and the free exercise of religion in society.

In contrast to European cities, eighteenth century American colonial towns, already before independence, were characterized by a vibrant religious super-diversity. This was true of New York and Philadelphia, as well as of Providence, R.I. and Charleston, S.C. Moreover, even in the colonies which had established churches such as Congregational Massachusetts or Anglican Virginia only the elites belonged to the established church and therefore the majority of the population never had confessional affiliations nor was territorialized into the parish system. The churching of the American population took place after independence through continuous immigration and through the revivalist conversions and evangelical campaigns associated with the Second Great Awakening (Finke and Stark 1992). It is estimated that before independence less than 20 percent of the American population belonged to churches or sects, that is, had any
religious affiliation. By the 1830's, however, over 60 percent of the American population already belonged to some religious denomination. Baptists, Methodists and Catholics, had been only tiny minorities at the time of independence, each constituting approximately only 1 percent of the population. By the 1840s, however, the three had become by far the largest American denominations, many times the size of the old established colonial churches (Congregational, Anglican, and Presbyterian) and constituting already more than 50 percent of the population. But along with them there were already dozens if not hundreds of old European sects and new American denominations (Wuthnow 1988).

The name itself, denomination, as well as the system of religious denomination in an American invention which has no equivalent in any European language. It is usually translated either as confession, or as sect, but it actually has a radically new connotation, which is not captured by the old European terms. Denomination is simply the name which I assume as the member of a voluntary religious association and the one by which I am recognized by others. Institutionally crucial is the fact that it is a system of mutual recognition of groups in society without state recognition or regulation. Indeed while American strangers typically tend to inquire or to reveal to one another their religious denominations, the American state has no right to enquire or survey the religious denomination of its citizens.

Crucial is the fact that while in Europe processes of modernization and urbanization were historically associated with un-churching, deconfessionalization and drastic secularization, in the United States processes of urbanization and modernization have been continuously associated with processes of churching, denominational affiliation, and religious revivals. Through continuous immigration the system of denominational pluralism which was at first an internal Protestant model has expanded to incorporate first all the religions of Europe and today all the religions of the world. Indeed one could venture to assume that there is no religion anywhere in the world which does not have some congregational presence in the United States. Moreover, it has been repeatedly observed by immigration scholars that immigrants today as much as in the 19th century tend to become more religious in America after immigration than they were in their home countries. That means that religion in America is not a traditional residue called to disappear with progressive modernization, but is a modern response to the challenges confronting immigrant groups that have to find a space in a religiously diverse society. Immigrant religions are not simply traditional ethnic remnants but are actually creative transformations of religious resources in novel contexts. The various branches of English Protestantism were radically transformed in America and the same happened to immigrant Catholicism, to immigrant Judaism, and is happening today to Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism (Casanova 2007).

Surveys of American religion reveal two persistent characteristics of the American religious system. The first is the high level of religious belief (over 90% of the population declare belief in God), of religious affiliation (around 80% of the American population declare some religious denominational affiliation), and of individual and collective religious practice (over 70% pray regularly and over 50% participate in congregational religious services at least once a month). The second remarkable characteristic is the highly competitive and dynamic fluidity of American religious pluralism. According to the 2008 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Survey, more than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have switched their religious affiliation since childhood. If change in Protestant denomination is included, the number of adults who have switched their religious affiliation rises to 44 percent (Casanova 2012b). This is a phenomenon totally incomprehensible in the European confessional context, where the only relevant change is unchurching and confessional secularization, not the change in religious affiliation.

Two principles are central to American religious denominationalism: a) The principle of individual voluntary congregation and association of lay people, so that even religions which have no such congregational association tradition, such as Catholicism, Hinduism or Buddhism, tend to adopt the form in the United States and b) the principle of formal equality of all denominations which tends to undermine the traditional European distinction between church and sect, as well as that between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, that is, true and false religion (Warner 2005). Of course, the power dynamics of majority-minority relations have always been operative in Christian Protestant America as evidenced by the prolonged nativist campaigns against "Romanism" or against "Mormonism." But majoritarian Protestantism has been continuously undermined from within but its own fragmentation into myriad denominations constituted along ecclesiological-theological differences but also along class, ethnic and racial lines (Niebuhr 1975).

Indeed, it is the interlocking dynamics of racial and religious denominationalism which has structured the character of group relations in American history. But while racial denominationalism was structured along a rigid, hierarchical binary system segregating a large hegemonic and privileged white majority and the oppressed underprivileged black minority, the system of religious denominationalism was based on a much more fluid, in
principle egalitarian, super-diversity. Steven Vertovec has coined the term "super-diversity" to characterize the extreme pluralization of minorities, which is increasingly characteristic of European mega-cities (Vertovec 2007). But in fact European super-diversity is still characterized by an increasing pluralization of minorities confronting still relatively homogeneous national majorities. In the case of American religious denomination- alism, the Protestant majority itself was fragmented into hundreds of denominations and the most suspect, i.e., un-American, religious minority, the Catholics, have constituted since the 1840's the largest American religious denomination, roughly from one fourth to one fifth of the American population. Moreover, the Catholics themselves were fragmented, at least congregationally if not hierarchically, into dozens of rigidly separated ethno-linguistic parishes: Irish, French, German, Italian, Polish, Croatian, Hispanic etc.

The new post-1965 immigration has contributed not only to an even greater pluralization of the existing religious super-diversity, but more importantly, coming as it did on the heels of the civil rights movement, to an increasing pluralization of the American system of racial denomination- alism, undermining in the process the binary black-white racial system. Today, the so-called "minorities" (Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, etc.) constitute already a majority of the population in every large American city.

I have lingered on this comparison between European and American processes not in order to contrast an idealized model of urban religious pluralism with the European model of urban secularization, but in order to make two basic points. The first point is that social theories of urbanization were blinded by the European experience to ignore completely the significance of religious groups, religious movements and religious dynamics in modern processes of urbanization. This urban secularist blind spot is evident in the fact that even the Chicago school of urban studies, despite its ethnographic focus on immigrant and ethno-racial group dynamics, missed completely the religious dimension of these urban processes in Chicago or elsewhere in America. Yet it should be obvious that in the same way that one cannot seriously study the African American experience and its community dynamics without studying the Black churches, one cannot study practically any immigrant group in America without paying attention to its religious dynamics (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). This is true of older immigrant groups as well as of the two newest and largest immigrant groups in America, Mexicans and Chinese. While it may have been possible in the past, as the work of Weishan Huang (2010) and Kenneth Guest (2003) has shown, today it is no longer possible to study Chinatowns in New York or elsewhere without paying close attention to their increasingly diverse religious dynamics.

The second main point is that if one finds such fundamental transatlantic differences between Europe and the United States in otherwise similar and comparable processes of modernization, urbanization and secularization within the Christian West, the more one should expect differential dynamics which will tend to follow neither a European nor an American model, elsewhere.

A comparison of Quebec and Brazil, two post-confessional post-Catholic societies illustrate the same dual divergent pattern. Up to the 1960's, Quebec had been a homogeneous confessional Catholic society, arguably the region with the highest levels of religious belief and practice not only in Canada but in all of North America. In one single generation, as a consequence of "the quiet revolution," Quebec underwent a drastic process of secularization. State, nation, and the population of Quebec were de-confessionalized. The new secular state not only had taken over from the Church education, health care and most social services but it supplanted the Church as "the embodiment of the French nation in Canada" (Seljak 1996). Religious practice and affiliation plummeted and today Quebec is arguably the most secularized region of North America. A population which had been previously homogeneously Catholic had become in short order homogeneously secular and post-Catholic. As in Western Europe, the only dynamic of religious pluralism was brought in by the new immigrants. Paradoxically, as indicated by the "Report of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on Reasonable Accommodation of Minorities," laicist assumptions now prevalent among the post-Catholic population are the source of tensions with the new immigrant religious minorities, particularly with Muslims (Bouchard and Taylor 2008).

Since the 1960's Brazil has experienced its own quiet secular revolution. Brazil has also ceased being a confessional Catholic society. But deconfessionalization of state, nation and population has not led to drastic homogeneous secularization but rather to an explosion of religious pluralism of all kinds. Brazil remains the largest Catholic society and a dynamic center of global Catholicism. But simultaneously it has become a dynamic center of global Pentecostalism and a dynamic global center for the transformation of Afro-American religions.

Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's global cities, exhibit increasingly pluralist religious dynamics. One finds side by side divergent Catholic trends from liberation theology to thriving charismatic communities, divergent Protestant trends from the historical denominations to Mormons,
Jehovah Witness, Pentecostal churches and Neo-Pentecostal mega-churches, Afro-Brazilian movements such as Umbanda and Candomblé, new Amer-Indian religious movements, and immigrant diasporas communities of all kinds, Jewish, Muslim and Bahá’ís, Christian Middle Eastern, Eastern Orthodox, and Greek-Catholic, Japanese Buddhist and Chinese Taoist, as well as new Brazilian syncretic cults such as La Comunidade Espírita O Vale do Amanhecer near Brasilia or O Templo Eucarístico Espírita de la Legion de la Boa Vontade en Brasilia. Moreover, permeating all the religious phenomena in Brazil one finds the ubiquitous, syncretic and protracted espiritismo.

While Brazil may be an extreme case, one can observe similar processes of religious pluralization throughout Latin America (Levine 2012). Moreover, a global comparative look at post-colonial global cities throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America would seem to indicate that the ‘new world’ paradigm of religious innovation and pluralization appears more adequate and fruitful than the old European paradigm of secularization and religious decline. Indeed, the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) and other emerging socio-economic powers such as South Africa are all characterized by diverse patterns of religious pluralism (Gossaert and Palmer 2007; Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012).

One can offer a series of general analytical-theoretical observations, which may account for the increasing rather than decreasing relevance of religion in contemporary global processes of urbanization:

a) The globalization of religious-secular domains and their diverse institutionalization

The genealogical and teleological European theories of secularization were grounded on the basic premise that “religion” was a “primitive,” “ancient,” or “traditional” universal human phenomenon which was bound to weaken, if not altogether disappear, and be superseded by the secular. The more modern a society became the less religious and the more secular it would also become. The theory could not account for the possibility that societies were becoming increasingly both more religious and more secular, that indeed global modernization was accomplished everywhere by the diverse institutionalization of religious and secular domains and that religion in this respect rather than being a “traditional” phenomenon shared by all pre-modern societies, was a very modern construction that accompanied everywhere the globalization of the Christian Western religious-secular divide.

Indeed, in the last two decades numerous voices have emerged in anthropology and religious studies, challenging the most fundamental premise shared by the entire scientific study of religion since it began to emerge in the 17th-18th centuries. Namely, that religion rather than being a supposedly universal, trans-historical and transcultural social phenomenon, is actually a relatively modern construction. Or at least, that the category of religion itself, as an abstract and general phenomenon, is of relatively recent origin. That in fact, the classification of social phenomena through the binary distinction religious/secular, is what constitutes the modern global religious field in the first place and that in this respect religion or at least our conception of it is a product of secular modernity.

The modern “secular-religious” system of classification that emerged out of the transformation of Western Christianity and which we tend to characterize as a process of secularization has now become globalized, entering in dynamic transformative interaction with all non-Western systems of classification, pre-axial as well as axial. All the religio-cultural systems, Christian and non-Christian, Western and non-Western are now being transformed through these global interactive dynamics. Following Charles Taylor (2007) one can understand this process as the global expansion of the secular immanent frame.

In this respect, not only the so-called “secular” societies of the West but the entire globe is becoming increasingly more secular and “disenchanted” in the sense that the cosmic order is increasingly defined by modern science and technology, the social order is increasingly defined by the interlocking of “democratic” states, market economies, and mediatic public spheres, and the moral order is increasingly defined by the calculations of rights-bearing individual agents, claiming human dignity, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet, comparisons of secular Europe and religious America or the evidence of religious revivals around the world make clear that within the same secular immanent frame one can encounter very

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2 The literature is immense. Cf. Camargo (1973); Burdick (2004); Carranza (2011); Mariz (2009); Mariz and Machado (1998); Mariz and Campos (2011); Antoniazzi (2004); Pierucci (2000) and (2004); Ricardo Mariano (2009); Oro, Corten, and Jean-Pierre Dozon (2003); Almeida (2009); Prandi (1999); Motta (1994) and (2002); Gomes Marques (2009).

3 See Velho (2009); Freton (2004); Coleman (2000); Robbins (2004); Cannell (2005); Martin (2011).

4 The names of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Russell McKeown and Jonathan Smith in religious studies, Talal Asad and Peter van der Veer in anthropology, Tomoko Manzawa in history, Henri de Vries in philosophy and Peter Beyer in sociology serve as important milestones in those debates.
diverse religious dynamics (Berger, Davie, and Fokas, 2008). In this respect, the disenchantment of the world does not entail necessarily the disenchantment of consciousness, the decline of religion or the end of magic. On the contrary, it is compatible with all forms of re-enchantment and religious revival.

What is increasingly less tenable is a secularist reading of the historical process of secularization. As a modern philosophy of history secularism turned the particular Western Christian historical process of secularization into a universal teleological process of human development from belief to unbelief, from primitive magical irrational religion to modern rational post-metaphysical secular consciousness. Even when the particular role of internal Christian developments in the process of secularization is acknowledged it is not to stress the particular contingent nature of the process, but rather to stress the universal significance of the uniqueness of Christianity. According to Marcel Gauchet’s (1997) striking formulation, Christianity is “the religion to exit from religion.”

The paradox is that the globalization of the Western secular-religious regime leads not to the exit from religion but rather to all kinds of novel religious transformations. Indeed, what characterizes the contemporary global moment is not only the fact that all forms of human religion, past and present, from the most “primitive” to the most “modern” are available for individual and collective appropriation. Equally relevant is that fact that increasingly they must learn to coexist side by side in today’s global cities. This contemporary social fact tends to put into question all teleological schemes of religious rationalization and development which tended to place “primitive” and “traditional” forms of religion as older human cultural forms to be superseded by more modern, secular, and rational ones.

b) The progressive consolidation of an international human rights regime, with individual religious freedom as its core principle

Paradoxically, with its institutionalization first in the West and with its ensuing globalization, the secular immanent frame becomes the very guarantor of the post-axial secular/religious system which guarantees the equal, non-hierarchic free exercise of religion to all forms of religion, pre-axial, axial and post-axial. The sacralization of human rights and the sacralization of the right of each and all individuals to religious freedom serves as the constitutive principle of such a post-axial global pluralist religious system.

One finds, of course, a tremendous variety of secular regimes of separation of religious and political authority as well as of state management of religious pluralism, along with very different patterns of majority/minority relations which are mainly structured by different forms of nationalism and by different immigration regimes. In this respect, the US “wall of separation” is significantly different from the French system of laïcité. Notwithstanding the fact that post-Ottoman Turkey and post-colonial Senegal tried to adopt the French model of laïcité, the ensuing secular regimes and the systems of management of religious pluralism in these two Muslim majoritarian societies diverge significantly from each other and from the French model. In their responses to Western colonialism the modernizing elites in India and China crafted radically different projects of secular modernization. India relied on the mobilization of religion and religious identities as a positive anti-colonial resource, while the various Chinese regimes have tried to erase all forms of traditional Chinese religion as an obstacle to modernization. Both strategies had very different consequences in divergent patterns of institutionalization of secular states, state management of religious pluralism, nationalist projects and majority-minority relations. We could point for example to similarly divergent secular-religious dynamics in Indonesia and Malaysia, in South Africa and Nigeria, or in Russia and Ukraine.

Yet, the secular state management of religion is everywhere under siege, or at least in need of substantive revision as it confronts the expansion of the principle of individual religious freedom, as well as increasing religious pluralization and new transnational religious dynamics linked to immigration and globalization. However, even though the principle of religious freedom as a basic human right is becoming globalized, this does not mean that “religious freedom” as a norm or aspiration is necessarily interpreted or understood everywhere in the same way. It may mean different things in different countries, cultures and religious traditions – and these different meanings may well be in conflict with one another. The individualist principle of religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and right of conversion may be in fundamental tension with a communitarian understanding of the collective rights of peoples, minorities and groups to protect and preserve their traditions and cultures from imperial, “universalist” or majoritarian predatory practices. The ensuing tensions turn religion everywhere into a contested public issue.

Moreover, the expanding transnational human rights regime encounters broad resistance on the part of states that aspire not only to the
monopolistic control of the means of violence, but also to the control of religious groups and cultural identities over their territories. Equally resistent may be religious authorities or “churches,” in the broad Weberian sense of the term, in so far as they claim or aspire to religious monopoly over their civilizational or national territories. In such cases one may expect conflicts – at times violent – over “religious liberty,” “evil cults,” “religious defamation,” or “blasphemy.”

c) Dynamics of democratization of religious authority
Yet everywhere one can also witness, in all religious traditions, processes of fragmentation, pluralization and democratization of religious authority. The traditional hierarchic division between the high culture of religious literati and ordinary popular folk religiosity is under siege in all large urban centers. Contemporary processes of urbanization are accompanied by the competitive appropriation of religious resources in group differentiation and congregational associations, as well as by religious innovation and cosmopolitanism from below. The very distinctions between high and low, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and religion and magic are ever more difficult to maintain or to enforce without resistance or conflict.

Let me offer as concluding illustration of all these points an ethnographic observation from a vibrant Umbanda congregation in São Paulo, Templo de Ordem Iniciática do Cruzeiro Divino (OIDC), founded in 1970 by the Umbanda priest Pai Rivas, alias medical cardiologist Dr. Francisco Rivas Neto, and expert in tantric medicine and Indian mysticism also known as Mestre Arhapiagha. The title of one of his books, Sacerdote, Mago e Medico. Curas e Autocura Umbandista points to his triple persona as pre-axial magician, axial priest and post-axial secular global preacher of human equality and fraternity among all religions, peoples and cultures.5 The motto of his OIDC congregation, which has also a branch in Planaltina, Distrito Federal, is “Somos todos diferentes, mas nao somos desiguais” (“We are all different, but we are not unequal”). He is also the founder of the Faculdade de Teologia Umbandista (FTU), adjacent to the temple, accredited in 2003 by the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Culture as an institution of higher learning, which has the motto “Educando para uma Cultura de Paz” and publishes the Journal, Teologia de Convergencia.

The vibrant religious ceremony I attended, full of singing and dancing, started at 9pm and lasted for several hours well past midnight. The ceremony started with a solemn universalist homily by Pai Rivas

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