



The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam by Armando Salvatore #anthroislam

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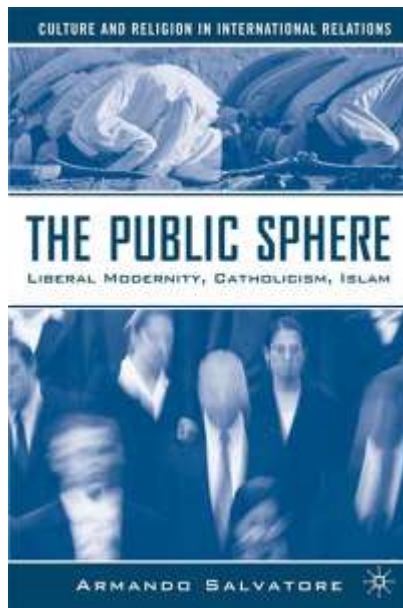


Of Allegra's [excellent list](#) of recent publications pertaining to Islam, [The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam](#) is perhaps the least anthropological. Nevertheless, I was glad to get the opportunity to review Professor Armando Salvatore's book, one of a [remarkable number](#) he has written in recent years on the topics of Islam, modernity, social practice, and the common good.

Armando Salvatore, *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam*.



Series: *Culture and Religion in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan (2007). 0230622313. 304 pages.



Since the English translation of Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the notion of a 'public sphere' has become a central resource within academic circles and further afield. And yet, as others have observed, Habermas underplayed the role of religious traditions in his account. Salvatore suggests that 'this gap has been partly filled' by theorists such as Charles Taylor, Craig Calhoun, Adam Seligman and Shmuel Eisenstadt. His aim is to go beyond these figures by 'fill[ing] the gap in a more systematic way by devising a genealogical approach to the public sphere through the analysis of

key transformations within Western traditions' (2). Genealogy here is understood as 'a history oriented, civilizational contextualization of communication and of its normative conditions' (10). For Salvatore, crucial to his approach, and indeed understanding the work as a whole, is 'an investment in reconstructing a sociologically viable notion of tradition' (13). So, while Habermas 'implies that tradition is by definition nonreflexive and not subject to an inherent process of revision', Salvatore's text aims to show that 'traditions are mainly forms for shaping, collating, and governing modes of speech and dialogue, and reasoning into synoptic ensembles which are in a permanent state of unbalance' (74).

The book offers a series of ambitious, impressive and sophisticated theoretical and interdisciplinary discussions, mobilising figures such as Baruch Spinoza, Giambattista Vico, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Talal Asad, Alasdair McIntyre, Taylor and Eisenstadt, and concepts such as the Axial Age, telos, poiesis, phronesis, and publicness understood as an ego-alter relationship.



Having set out the problematic nature of the modern understanding of the public sphere, Salvatore uses the first two chapters to refine his approach. In Chapter 1 he aims to disentangle some key terms, specifically 'tradition', 'religion' and 'civilization', while in Chapter 2, he seeks to develop a notion of 'discursive tradition' that 'ties... life form and language game, and thereby circumvents the pitfalls of phenomenologically impregnated visions of the "lifeworld", as well as postphenomenological versions of pragmatism that resist incorporating a notion of tradition' (72). The purpose of this exercise, Salvatore tells us, is to help us grasp more carefully the dynamics of change involved within his genealogy.

The next two chapters, 'The Public Reason of the Commoner' and 'The Collective Pursuit of Public Weal', explore how particular historical instances of religious traditions, namely Roman Catholicism and Sunni Islam, might be understood within his genealogy. Chapter 4 is the most relevant section of the text for those in Islamic Studies. Here Salvatore gives a useful historical and sociological introduction to Islamic traditions and jurisprudence, before connecting his overarching argument to the theme of *maslaha*, 'the conceptual proof stone for underpinning theoretically informed but practice-oriented views of the common good which were suitable to become platforms for concrete articulations of the pursuit of public weal', and the work of Andalusian jurist [Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi](#) (d. 1388), who is also placed in conversation with [Thomas Aquinas](#) (d. 1274).



Chapter 5 seeks to present how 'an important and early dimension of the European

Enlightenment was also and by necessity "axial" with a particular focus on [Vico](#), who reads as the hero of the book, before Chapter 6 returns to the modern formulations of the public sphere. Salvatore concludes with a 'Complex Genealogy' of the Public Sphere, seeking to improve understanding 'of the ideational limits of a social theory exposed to the liberal bias of the Anglo-American tradition (251), and suggesting 'the possibility and maybe necessity of several competing, dialoguing, and overlapping theories of the public sphere' (260).

Salvatore's work engages with a significant concept within anthropology, and it is easy to sympathise with his claim that 'most social science tends to take [the construct of the public sphere] for granted, either glorifying it as the key to a scholarship committed to rationalization and democratization, or willfully ignoring it for disguising more relevant structural issues and cultural conflicts in society' (31).



For Allegra readers and their students, the book's most important contribution is the comprehensive way it complicates the idea of the 'public sphere', and how we might relate it to ideas such as religion, secularity, universalism, tradition and rationality. Salvatore might be usefully compared to Asad here, and it is an interesting coincidence that the title of this text seems to echo Asad's 'Formations of Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity'.

The book is not without weaknesses, which will probably frustrate some readers more than others. Anthropologists, for instance, might find most unconvincing the various deterministic, normativist and universal claims within the text. Furthermore, while his cross-cultural readings of Islamic traditions are a welcome contribution to public sphere literature, as Dyala Hamzah has already noted, they represent 'a normative championing of marginal strands, rather than a historical reconstruction'. Finally, social theorists and historians might question both the soundness of his ego-alter model of publicness and the meaningful limits of Axial Age terminology.

Grounded in social theory, but touching on a wide variety of themes, scholars from a range of disciplines will find parts, if not all, of this book of interest. However, in view of both the author's dense writing style and the complexity of his enterprise, the study of Salvatore's 'Public Sphere' in its entirety might best be reserved for postgraduate level.