The Role of Religion in Politics: The Analytical Category of the Social Public Sphere

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Abstract:
Within the realm of political theory, the existing republican and liberal theories of the public sphere have not been normatively and practically sufficient for Muslim-majority contexts. Few prominent scholars such as Habermas have provided a revitalised approach to the discussions of religion in the public sphere, enabling an expansion of the artificial and controversial boundaries between the private and the public as well as the religious and the political. In his publications since the mid-2000s, Habermas has proposed the notions of ‘post-secularism,’ ‘religious tolerance,’ and the ‘modernization of religious consciousness’ and he significantly articulated new divisions for an ‘informal public sphere’ and an ‘institutional public sphere.’ In this article, I re-appropriate some of Habermas’ ideas to theorise about the analytically differentiated categories of social public sphere—a distinct form of a political public sphere where religious communal life is organised by civil society associations—and state public sphere—where the secular state controls the common institutional framework. The paper offers a more nuanced view of the relationship between religion and the public sphere as a way of reconciling political secularism and public religious presence that would help democratic consolidation in the Muslim world.
I. Introduction: Habermas and the New Conceptualisations of a Democratic Public Sphere

The existing republican and liberal theories have overlooked the role of religion in the public sphere. Even liberal constitutionalism, despite its claim of accommodating diversity and promoting pluralism, has incorporated religion only as a force to “be tolerated, but that cannot claim to provid[e] a cultural resource for the self-understanding of any truly modern mind” (Habermas, 2008: 26). Yet since the 2000s, when there were efforts to bring back religion once again to the heart of political theory, this pattern slightly changed, with reforming voices appearing within the liberal and republican traditions themselves. Charles Taylor’s ‘liberal-democratic secularism’ and Ayelet Shachar’s ‘transformative accommodation’ are prominent examples that moved away from the conventional idea of religion being a private matter to it becoming central to understanding public demands. These more enlightened models will be incorporated in the process of synthesisisation and reorientation of the existing theories and will conceptualise a new framework on the social public sphere. Hitherto, this paper will more specifically focus on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, who has also refashioned his opinion on the public role of religion in his latest publications stimulating more informed and nuanced approaches to the debate (Habermas, 2006; Habermas and Ratzinger, 2005).

Habermas has recognised the political significance of religion in providing moral motivation for action and shaping collective lives. He has also recognised that the liberal ambition to keep religion outside political life inflicts disadvantage and injustice to people with religious normative systems. Certain themes emerged in Habermas’ more recent writings that revitalised the rethinking on the public sphere through the articulation of open and inclusive secularism, democratic tolerance and pluralism, and religious participation in an open-ended deliberative procedure. Thus, Habermas’ theorisation of ‘post-secularism,’ ‘religious tolerance,’ the ‘modernization of religious consciousness,’ and the relationship between the ‘informal public sphere’ and the ‘institutional public sphere’ are significant contributions in political theory that allow the rethinking of the role of religion in politics.

Proposing the concept of ‘post-secularism,’ Habermas (2006; 2008) reassesses his earlier position that religious identities should be appropriated at the threshold of a secular, democratic public sphere. Instead, the new concept underlines the necessity to reconsider secularism and go beyond the public sphere models of the secular states of the past towards more pluralistic ends. With post-secularism, Habermas still recognises that secularism, as a political and a thin moral good, is the epistemic foundation of liberal democracies. Yet
Habermas describes a revised recognition of the important role that religion plays in public life, thus articulating an enhanced idea of secularism that is inclusive of religious voices and needs.

Accordingly, in his more recent works, Habermas criticises the artificially constructed partition of the public and the private, in which public participation necessitates citizens to abandon their religious convictions and leave them to the realm of the private. The difficulty, he warns, is that “many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons” (2006: 8). Habermas also acknowledges religion’s provision of some “key resources for the creation of meaning and identity” that are essential for developing personal autonomy, self-respect, and individual good (Habermas, 2008: 10). Thus, deterring religious people from politically experiencing their worldviews, demands, and needs, in fact inflicts serious disadvantages on their self-esteem and substantially diminishes the quality of life they experience and in return the probability of their civic participation. As such, Habermas asks for the political inclusion of religious arguments to the public sphere of Western democracies.

Yet Habermas is also aware of the potential risk of religion in raising itself into a public power and becoming a divisive force within the public sphere. In order to maintain the secular and impartial nature of state institutions and preserve the social fabric while recognising the public role of religion, Habermas therefore suggests drawing a line between the ‘informal public sphere,’ where religious comprehensive doctrines can have unrestricted room for deliberation, and the ‘institutional public sphere,’ where only secular reason can have institutional influences (2006: 9). The informal public sphere “can be best described as a network for communicating information and points of view” where deliberation takes place in informal instances and social will formation (Habermas, 1996: 360, as cited in Salter, 2003: 124). Yet these “[c]ommutative fluxes and public influences” and policy advocacy in the informal public sphere can be changed into a matter for deliberation in a formal, institutionalised public sphere only if they are translated into a secular language (Lubenow, 2012: 63). In other words, in order for religious arguments to have an institutional representation, they have to fulfil “the institutional translation requirement” if they are to be debated and won within the boundaries of secular public reason (Habermas, 2006: 15). This is essentially subjecting comprehensive doctrines to a rational inquiry for them to be part of parliamentary debates, public policy- and law-making, and administrative authority. To address the rational and institutional translation process of religious language, Habermas introduced the idea of the “modernization of religious consciousness” towards what he calls...

In Habermas’ post-secular paradigm, religious toleration represents the normative foundation of liberal democratic coexistence within the public sphere. Habermas asserts that the civic inclusion of religious minorities in the political community and “the acceptance of the voluntary character of religious association” are to be recognised by the secular democratic state (2004: 12). Yet for this recognition to happen, religious minorities are also expected to “be tolerant,” internalising the equal civic and political rights and liberties of other members of the political community (Habermas, 2004: 11). According to Habermas:

Tolerance means that believers of one faith, of a different faith and non-believers, must mutually concede to one another the right to those convictions, practices and ways of living that they themselves reject (2008: 7).

Under the religious tolerance idea, the burden of translating religious into ‘rational’ reason is also shared by secular citizens. Secular citizens are expected to engage in the active process of understanding religious beliefs, needs, and demands in the informal public sphere. They should also leave behind possible existing prejudices and instead acknowledge that religious argumentations may enclose rational lines (2006: 19). Effectively, religious tolerance does not only involve a mutual expectation for respect, but also a dynamic form of national dialogue that upholds platforms for public debate. In Habermas’ own words:

The other side of religious freedom is, in fact, a pacification of the pluralism of worldviews that distribute burdens unequally. To date, only citizens committed to religious beliefs are required to split their identities, as it were, into their public and private elements…. But only if the secular side, too, remains sensitive to the force of articulation inherent in religious languages will the search for reasons that aim at universal acceptability not lead to an unfair exclusion of religions from the public sphere, nor sever secular society from important resources of meaning (2003:109).

In essence, what the Habermasian terms of “cooperative cognitive effort” and “complementary learning processes” signal is an active search for a reciprocal and reflective relationship of living together, or a more dialogical interaction and normative synergy between religious and secular citizens (Habermas, 2006: 15, 18).

Although Habermas writes within the European contexts where the main religion is Christianity, with Islam being mostly related to immigration issues these days, his ideas are crucial for rethinking the relationship between secularism and religion under the public sphere elsewhere. However, this could only be successfully done if it included a rigorous reinterpretation and reconfiguration of concepts such as secularism, religious modernisation, tolerance, and institutional arrangement in relation to the public sphere of the specific
contexts under examination, which are socially and normatively different than the ones Habermas was writing in and referring to.

In this article, I undertake such an endeavour with relation to Muslim-majority societies. To address the question of what kind of public sphere could render the greatest potential for democratic consolidation in Muslim-majority societies where Islam has a strong societal, organisational, and political claim on the masses, I will reorient the ideas introduced by Habermas and formulate new terms to develop a distinct theory of public sphere in Muslim-majority contexts. To do so, I will combine the ideas of thinkers from different genres of political theory, multiculturalism, liberalism, and Muslim political thought in order to articulate the analytically differentiated categories of social public sphere—a distinct form of a political public sphere where religious communal life is organised by civil society associations—and state public sphere—where the secular state controls the common institutional framework. I dedicate time to comprehensively develop the idea of social public sphere in order to understand its complexities by closely examining four categories: (a) transformativeness, (b) social Islam, (c) democratic toleration, and (d) institutional pluralism. By doing so, the ultimate aim of the paper is to offer a more nuanced view of the relationship between religion and the public sphere as a way of reconciling political secularism and public religious presence that would help the development of democratic public sphere in Muslim societies, strengthening normative and practical commitments to democracy in these settings.

II. The Analytical Category of the Social Public Sphere

The significant role of the public sphere in a successful implementation of a democratic regime is beyond dispute, as a public sphere that is independent of the state is necessary to cultivate democracy (Habermas, 1964: 52-53; Eickleman and Salvatore, 2003: 99). Historically, the emergence of the modern public sphere has been related to the rise of independent rational thought. The Enlightenment idea that humans can use their own reason and free will in the pursuit of knowledge and morality, which are not preordained by a divine rule, has thus been crucial to the development of the idea of the (secular and scientific) public sphere. Yet unlike in the Western world, in the Muslim world the authority of the divine revelation has not been deeply questioned and destabilised and thus the emergence of a public sphere as per its evolution in Western democracies is thought to be next to impossible in predominantly Muslim contexts. Ernest Gellner (1992; 1997) like many other orientalists has viewed Islam as an all-pervasive comprehensive doctrine that lacks a political culture of
compromise and institutions between the state and the individual, and considered this as the primary cause impeding the way to democratisation.

However, anti-essentialist arguments raised by thinkers such as Esposito (1992) and Kramer (1993) identified that democratic hindrance is not a product of an incompatibility between democratic political culture and Islam. If many Muslim societies have never followed a life under a democratic public sphere, it is mainly “allied to structural factors” within their respective political systems rather than religious belief systems (Volpi, 2004: 1062). In other words, a strong, all-pervasive, and authoritarian state has undercut the establishment of a democratically tolerating political environment. The ruling elite have often subjugated public opinion and dictated the common good. Even in societies like Turkey, Jordan, and Morocco, which have experienced a relatively free public sphere, not all groups have been allowed equal access to public debate and not everyone’s legal rights have been equally protected. In most cases, the partial democratic change has been “part of an attempt to channel political participation into a discrete, state-delineated political space” rather than a free public sphere that cultivates democratic communication and deliberates established political norms (Wiktorowicz, 1999: 606).

Consequently, for understanding the conditions in which Muslim democracy could be rendered a genuine possibility, the rethinking of the public sphere is sine qua non. The existing republican and liberal theories of the public sphere were not normatively and operationally sufficient for Muslim-majority contexts. Scholars like Habermas have provided the impetus for the development of alternative conceptions of the public sphere, enabling an expansion of the artificial boundaries between the private and the public. This paper takes this task further by arguing in favour of new divisions for state authority and political–institutional organisation, reworking the boundaries between the state and the public sphere through political theory, which has traditionally neglected this division. In particular, the new concept put forth here of the ‘social public sphere,’ as distinct from a state public sphere, aims to recognise the communal role of religion more effectively than the liberal and republican models while upholding individual rights and safeguarding the prospect of political and ideological dissent as successfully as the liberal models.

A. The Differentiation between the State Public Sphere and the Social Public Sphere

A constructivist direction for conceptualising state–civil society relations asserts that “states are not the sort of abstract, formal objects which readily lend themselves to clear-cut,
unambiguous definition” (Jessop, 1990: 340). State–society relations are “blurred, constantly reshaped by actors, and by no means well-defined” (Shahar, 2008: 420). This “valuable new [constructivist] direction for theorizing the state and state-society relations” can potentially inspire new understandings on state–civil society relations, going beyond the universalist secularism that strictly controls public life (Shahar, 2008: 432). On this subject, the work of Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im reveal “the illegitimacy of drawing sharp ontological distinctions between ‘the political’ and ‘the social’” problematizing the orthodox models of the public sphere (Cook et al., 2016: 6).

In the republican and liberal models, the state and the public sphere come together and both are seen as belonging to the realm of the political. In these frameworks, decoupling the state and the public sphere from religion is thought to be the way to maintain neutrality (Habermas, 1989: 3). Thus, identities, goods, demands, and needs deriving from religious sources are often overlooked as a component of democratic politics (Barzilai, 2004: 13). Although prominent, these models were not the only ones capturing state–religion relations, and as Habermas asserted, such a form of secularism that sets clear boundaries between the spheres of the public and the private are not sophisticated enough to respond to the multiple affiliations of modern citizens (2008: 578). With his model of post-secularism, Habermas has aptly demonstrated that secularism can have multiple alternatives in liberal democracies to better reflect the complexity of the empirical relationship between the comprehensive moral doctrines and the political organisation.

As John Keane, Amyn B. Sajoo, and others have argued, democracy does not only need the institutional separation of the state from the religious and other comprehensive moral views. But democracy also “requires the institutional division between a certain form of state and civil society” (Keane, 1993: 28) so that individuals as part of active and free civil society are able to “freely associate with others outside the control of the state” (Sajoo, 2002: 215). Similar to Habermas, they have emphasised “the need to separate the institutions of the state, religion and society, as a shared modern democratic and ethical imperative” (Sajoo, 2004: 226). On this subject, going beyond the Habermasian paradigm of informal versus formal categories in favour of allocating more political strength to the ‘informal’ part of the argument, thinkers like An-Na’im make a far-reaching argument advocating the necessity of establishing “the distinction between the state and politics” for the ultimate success of democratisation processes in Muslim societies. An-Na’im argues that “the organs and institutions of the state”—or the “more settled and deliberate operational side of self-governance”—and politics—or the more “dynamic process of making choices” for
“organized political and social actors” holding “competing visions of the public good”—are to be differentiated from one another (An-Na‘im, 2000: 3-5). An-Na‘im persists that even in morally minimalist secular states, there is still the possibility of influencing political actors through political, ideological viewpoints. Thus, “complete independence is not possible because of the political nature of the state.” Therefore, he concedes, it is necessary to form “a degree of separation of the state from politics” so that the state can show equal respect and undifferentiated treatment to all groups, and even at time of excesses of executive authority, the political mechanisms to resort to state institutions to retrieve the governmental errors and mistakes can be open. Accordingly, this degree of division becomes vital to guarantee the state’s impartiality to “mediate and adjudicate among the competing visions and policy proposals” (An-Na‘im, 2000: 3). An-Na‘im strongly believes that the failure to observe this distinction “tends to severely undermine the peace, stability and healthy development of the whole society” (2000: 4).

The distinction between the spheres of politics, or the government and the public sphere, is particularly essential when it comes to Muslim politics. Individual Muslims often view the materialisation of the religion’s claims mandatory for them to pursue their definition of a good life. The very arguments in support of an ideological Islamic state and in contradiction of secularism are in fact a by-product of the popular conviction of the inseparability of religion and state. To this effect, in order to produce an antidote for anti-democratic thinking, the paper focuses on identifying an analytical differentiation between the state public sphere and a civil society public sphere, of which the latter is termed ‘social public sphere’. The state public sphere is conceptualised as the realm of shared political life and common institutions in which the core tasks of government are carried out the enduring basis of social unity and democratic regime. The state public sphere is not invested in moralising ideology, religiosity, or providing a comprehensive normative position. As a politically secular enterprise, as opposed to philosophical secularism (laicism), the state public sphere protects individual rights of life, liberty, property, and contract to uphold its main goal of allowing individuals to flourish and safeguard their differences between the accounts of a good life.
Meanwhile, the social public sphere is defined as a distinct form of a political public sphere where the political establishment, voluntary organisations, and individuals interact in organising social life. The social public sphere is capacious and resourceful enough to adapt to the public roles of different normative perspectives, and accordingly the public needs and interests of people with different conceptions of a good life, based on principles of tolerance, reconciliation, and respect. In this model, the state, as the basic political structure of society, shares political space with civil society and empowers it. Referring to “an extensive interpretation of associational freedoms,” the social public sphere suggests that “[m]any of the positive effects that states can bring about can also be obtained...through voluntary mechanisms” (Bader, 2007a: 53; Vallentyne and van der Vossen, 2014). Social public sphere here implies alternative public power of the civil society organisations recognised as “governing powers” that can regulate, organise, and administer social affairs, as categorically separate from the public power of the state (Hirst, 1994: 13). As such, “democratically negotiated freedom of religion from state interference” would “allow religious groups freedom not only to worship privately but to organize groups in civil society and political society” (Stepan, 2000: 42).

In essence, this differentiation between the state and the social public spheres ensures that there is no institutional link between religion and state institutions, despite the connectedness of religion and the public sphere. Here, the public “focus of [religions] is no longer the state but, rather, civil society” (Casanova, 1994: 63). It is based on devolution of moral and spiritual authorities from the state to the institutions and practices of the social public sphere. In this understanding, Islam has “an autonomous life in the hands of social actors” and not in the hands of hierarchical and formal religious authorities (Yavuz, 2007: 489). By doing so, “public policy can benefit from the moral guidance of religion, and pluralistic societies can enjoy peace and stability by regulating the relationship between religion and the state through secularism” (An-Na’im, 2002b: 8).

In fact, this categorical distinction between the different layers of the public sphere would guarantee the neutrality of the state realm by separating religion and state power, so that the autonomous rights of civil societies to practice religion can be recognised and political processes that can satisfy substantive moral needs, demands, and interests can be accommodated. Essentially, the social public sphere is not one of the informal political deliberations in the Habermasian sense, but has some degree of institutional power, albeit different from that of the state. This amounts to a democratic decentralisation of state power, allocating a degree of formalised influence to organised religions as well as to other identity
groups facilitated through administrative and political autonomy of voluntary minority associations (Bader, 2003b: 132). Essentially, dynamic and multi-layered understandings of the relationship among the state, civil society, and public sphere enables the social public sphere to provide resources and opportunities for the formalisation of the public functions of civil society (Hirst and Bader, 2001: 6-7).

After giving the conceptual explanations of both the state and the social public sphere categories, I now will primarily focus on conceptualising the social public sphere, as it is the sphere where religion—as a personal or a communal issue—can play a social and political role as a way to rearticulate the public role of religion in politics. This paper will now develop four concepts under the category of a social public sphere—transformativeness, social Islam, democratic tolerance, and institutional pluralism—in order to understand the ways, forms, and means through which the social public sphere can work.

a. Transformativeness

The idea of transformativeness that moves beyond a binary relationship between Islam and democracy and instead calls for their dialogical interaction and moral convergence is the first conceptual category that is relevant for the formation of the social public sphere. The idea of transformativeness, which is a notion emanating from liberal democratic theory, is articulated by thinkers such as Habermas, Kymlicka, Shachar, and Mookherjee as well as by An-Na'im and Khaled Abou el-Fadl. Transformativeness expects democratic societies to reduce and eventually overcome the conflict and animosities engendered by ethnic, religious, cultural, or primordial identities, within both majority and minority groups. This idea is defined elsewhere as the “liberal expectancy” by Nancy Rosenblum, which assumes that life under democratic governance will induce citizens with traditional identities to internalise liberal democratic norms, leading citizens to reach an agreement on the common good and civic ethos (1998: 51). Liberal thinkers such as Habermas and Shachar rest their multiculturalism theories on this idea of liberal expectancy: a Janus-faced commitment to the liberal transformation of both the policies of public institutions and the practices of groups with undemocratic propensities. This dual transformation happens through the processes of “on-going dialogue” and “constant interaction” between the agency and the structure to increase the pressure to negotiate a desired change (Shachar, 2008: 146-147). In other words, it is hoped that multicultural accommodation will accomplish an environment of normative reformation for democratic consolidation by further pluralising the political establishment as
well as functioning as a catalyst for undemocratic groups in the direction of critical and
democratic internal change.

The notion of transformativeness is thus essential to understand how to achieve
normative and institutional change and reach a shared normativity within the public sphere. It is
important to note that tranformativeness here does not imply an interest or functionalist
convergence. It is rather about conceptual synergy, interconnectedness, and moral
convergence to indicate that “the internal transformation of each paradigm or
discourse…tends toward transformation in favor of the other two” (An-Na‘îm, 2005: 56).

When it comes to the societal level, the expectancy for the reformation of groups with
non-pluralistic sentiments should be agreed and not imposed by a moral agenda of the state or
“the wider communities’ standards” (Mookherjee, 2009: 159). Internal change within
communities is expected to come as a product of an encounter they make with democratic
structures and diverse social systems. In this process, the social public sphere facilitates
social encounters, democratic communication, and pluralistic environment, leading citizens
and groups “to think in part in terms of the interests of others,” understand one another, and
develop democratic toleration (Christiano, 2015; Habermas, 2006: 15, 18). Morally
developed interpretations and internal normative change within Muslim societies in favour of
democracy can only evolve from well-informed public debates of parties in a free and critical
political space. As interconnected and relevant components of the social public sphere notion,
the subsequent sub-sections will first articulate the notion of normative change at a religious
level under the category of social Islam and will then identify normative change at a societal
level under the category of democratic toleration. Finally, a layer of institutional change will
be discussed under the institutional pluralism debate.

b. Social Islam

Habermas discusses the “modernization of religious consciousness” as an important
element for religious arguments and claims to be part of the public sphere (2006: 14). Yet, he
does not substantially explain the processes of this modernisation except through his
argument concerning tolerance building. This section will rework the role of religion in the
social public sphere of democracies, by articulating the necessary grounds for the
development of social Islam as a category of analysis. Social Islam refers to the
contemporary processes of civic engagements in Muslim societies that are likely to lead to
religious normative reformation that is favourable to democratisation. Through these
processes, religious convictions and practices can be reconstructed so that a normative common ground and an overlapping political consensus that comprises all citizens regardless of their religious orientations can develop in Muslim societies. In other words, social Islam defines the process of value change in which citizens with Islamic comprehensive views endorse certain ideals of a shared democratic life (namely, tolerance, negotiation, pluralism, and dialogue), changing the relationship between Islam and democracy in a principled and moral manner.

To this end, I have reworded the question of whether Islam is compatible with democratic values to ask whether Muslim interpretations of the Islamic tradition are compatible with the principles of democracy or not. In fact, one can find principles in Islam supporting democracy and human rights and at the same time find premises that are totally antithetical to them. The diversity of the Islamic tradition leaves considerable room for reconstruction. Thus, Islam being supportive or antagonistic to democracy really depends on the moral construction given to it by an individual Muslim.

According to Khaled Abou al-Fadl, if we look at the generic understandings of Islam today, we see a notion of Islam that has become quite “unrelated to modern ethical requirements” and “irreconcilable with universal moral standards” (el-Fadl, 2002: 106-107). Islam as widely understood and practised today adheres to “a long list of morally noncommittal legal commands,” depriving its moral capacity to develop democratic thinking (el-Fadl, 2002: 15). This phenomenon has been entangled with two main reconstructions of Islam in the contemporary era. First, as Ziauddin Sardar describes, Islam turned into a national cultural creed, where the state defined the role and nature of religion and controlled and used it for its own interest in politics (2002: 17). As Nadir Hashemi has revealed, in these contexts, the normative relationship between religion and politics is defined by the state. Religious populations were not given the chance to bargain and reconcile themselves with secularism (Hashemi, 2009: 2). For instance, in countries like Turkey and Tunisia, secularisation was not a “consequence of religious formation,” that was in fact shown “a reversal of the European experience” (Hashemi, 2009: 70). Second, in places where Islam has been forcefully banished from the state to the private realm, it has emerged as an ideology that has been positioned as a political opposition that aims to recapture the platform of the state. As such, Islamic resurgence and religious politicisation in the Muslim world often took the path of Islamism or political Islam (Cesari, 2014: xv). Overall, both cases have been intertwined; in other words, the politicisation of religion has been undemocratic mostly due to the authoritarian nature of most states and the equally authoritarian resistance to forced
modernisation programmes. In addition, the correlation between them in reinforcing one another is striking (Hashemi, 2009: 147). Essentially, the current politicisations of Islam have led to undesirable outcomes. Islam has been used as a tool for authoritarian political mobilisation and power consolidation. Thus, Islam’s moral capacity to cultivate intellectual roots of democracy has faded.

Like Habermas, prominent political theorists such as Hannah Arendt have long pointed to the importance of “a healthy respect for democratic values” and civic virtues as well as “the democratic habits of mind that can only be sustained in civil society, in initiatives (publications, civic associations, social movements, forms of disobedience) undertaken at the grassroots” as essential conditions for democracy (Isaac, 1994: 160, 162). On the matter of how to cultivate democratic values in Muslim societies, Abdulkareem Soroush reveals that:

democratic regimes cannot be sustained without ethical and/or religious commitments, including respect for ‘the rights of others, justice, sympathy, and mutual trust’. In this regard, democracy owes a ‘great debt’ to genuine religious faith, and the latter can be seen as ‘the best guarantor of democracy.’ (as cited in Dallmayr, 2011: 445)

It is essential to concede that Islam, as conventionally understood and practised by Muslims, makes strong claims on their political beliefs and actions. It is often Islam, not secular ethics, that provides a stronger incentive in instilling the ethical foundation and virtues that can promote democratic processes. Modernist Muslim thinkers like el-Fadl have argued that for democracy to succeed in Muslim countries, it has “to become a systematic normative goal of large numbers of Muslims” (2004: 128). They have also emphasised that this can only happen if Islam works for the advantage of democracy in justifying democracy as a political and moral good. Essentially, the reinterpretation of Islamic ideas to nurture respect for democratic rights and freedoms is indispensable for the evolution of well-functioning democracy in the contexts where Islam is a principal marker of social, cultural, or political claims.

After outlining the rationale for religious reformation for the consolidation of democratic public sphere, this section will now examine how Muslim understandings of Islam can reconcile themselves with the normative foundations of democracy, such as democratic toleration, political secularism, and human rights. It will attempt to demonstrate how we can think about the “ways of both upholding the truth claims of their [Muslims’] religion and adopting the political values required to recognize the legitimacy of constitutional democracy” (March, 2011: 12). Accordingly, this section will turn to the idea
of social Islam as a desirable alternative to political Islam and official/state Islam in responding to the normative transformation of religion for democratic consolidation within Muslim-majority contexts.

Social Islam is a term coined by Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman, providing a democratic alternative to the religious politicisation of Islam and thus is essential in understanding Islam’s relation to the development of the social public sphere. In their notion of social Islam, Salvatore and Eickelman observe the emergence of modernised, civil, and pluralist forms of practising Islam, which they believe will lead to the emergence of a democratic public sphere, a sphere relatively independent from the dictates of the religious and political authorities (Salvatore and Eickelman, 2004a: x-xiii).

Salvatore and Eickelman insist that democracy will be invigorated through religious reformation organically emerging and developing in the context of social life. They refer to social organisations such as salons, coffee shops, literary circles, and media platforms, which are already on the ground, as factors that work in favour of increasingly open discussions of issues related to the “common good” (Salvatore and Eickelman, 2004a: xi). In addition, they contend that the spread of access to knowledge due to the rise of a print culture, new technologies, and social media have had massive implications for the development of people’s own interpretations of Islam as a form of “social normativity,” which in return leads to new forms of political engagement (Eickelman and Salvatore, 2003: 102). For instance, the Internet has created a social space where individuals can become equal citizens, carve out a level of independence from the religious and political authorities, and communicate with one another in a free manner capable of developing shared democratic values (Lynch, 2012). Essentially, social organisation goes beyond an elite establishment to more diverse forums for social communication with diverse kinds of communities involved. These social platforms emerging in the Muslim world like the café culture and media forums give people voice and diverse discursive means through which a vibrant social sphere can be materialised.

According to Salvatore, a transformation of traditional forms of sociality into what is called social Islam is believed to contribute to active and free participation of the citizens “arguing, acting, and deliberating in common through a rational pursuit of collective interest” to develop a shared normativity of engagement (2012: 437). Accordingly, social Islam in a way expresses the normative formation necessary for democratisation in which the agency to achieve the shared good is reclaimed by individuals who are “sovereign in their choices of conscience…to define their own life while respecting others’ right to do the same” (Maclure and Taylor, 2011: 11). In fact, all these modern changes are redefined in social spaces,
nurturing the development of individual and civic reasoning that has had a serious impact on the relationship between the religious and the political.

With the opening of public debate to larger numbers of people, social Islam represents the changing conditions of both religious authorities—from the formal bonds of the state and clergy to the individuals and civil society—and *shari`a*—from “a jurist’s notion” to “a popular trope…[of] practices needed to live a good life as a Muslim” (Eickelman and Salvatore, 2003: 102). Religion and morality are also elements of politics in the idea of social Islam but mostly in virtue of social organisations and individuals who bring their moral perspectives to public deliberation to engage in consensus-building as human agents. This process makes it possible to bring “Islamic principles in official policy and legislation through general political deliberation, but not as imperative religious doctrine” (An-Na‘im, 2009: 145). Religious arguments are elaborated on and contested in the public sphere as are the views of the citizens, but not because they are represented as a moral authority or clerical establishment. Thus, the social Islam phenomenon also exemplifies the politicisation of Islam in a democratic direction, where Islam can become a part of enlightened, well-informed, and honest public debate of individual citizens. Islam being part of democratic politics is also a by-product of the reinterpretation of religious ideas in alignment with the normative aspects of democracy through the processes explained under social Islam.

Hashemi explains the relationship between democratisation and religious reformation in a nutshell:

Democratization does not require a privatization of religion, but it does require a reinterpretation of religious ideas that are conducive to liberal democracy (2009: 12).

Thus, social Islam envisages an ongoing process of mass-level religious reformation, which involves bringing moral commitments to the individual’s understanding of Islam towards a “reconciliation with political secularism and universal human rights, thus lending critical support to democratisation” (Hashemi, 2009: 169). In efforts to show democracy as an ethically attractive political system, An-Na‘im asks his fellow Muslims to recognise democracy’s virtues of being a good, just, and accountable governance that facilities active and free participation of citizens in public debate, provides channels to rectify and correct political mistakes, and safeguards human dignity and intellect. With these virtues, he persists, democracy is not only the best political system we have today, but also the most resourceful one in facilitating an inclusive moral environment that permits the development of a genuine moral life compatible with the Islamic comprehensive vision. An ultimate test of morality, An-Na‘im explains, can only be conducted under a free environment where a moral agent can
exercise his/her self-reliant intellect to follow the divine guidance. The environment democracy provides can cultivate the special role of vicegerency in seeking a religiously inspired ethical life on the basis of personal reason and conviction (An-Na'īm, 2008: 3-4). This line of argumentation is important because it justifies democracy as a moral good by engaging with a kind of religious thinking that instils normative commitments to the principles of democracy.

Principally, Muslims’ normative commitments to democracy can develop through the processes of social Islam, which promises agents of renewal in a direction to “empower competing voices within the Muslim community, undermine conceptions of religious absolutism, and foster a mutual accommodation between religious commitment and...[democratic] values” (Emon, 2006: 331). It represents the spaces that allow conditions for democratic toleration, cultivating intercultural dialogue and common language of citizens “firmly founded upon the diverse communities” sharing “in cross-religious moral concern” with human rights, the shared good, justice, and the rule of law (Sachedina, 2009: 176). Accordingly, social Islam stands for the process of reinterpreting Islam to make it congenial to pluralism, openness, and democratic tolerance, so that in return social Islam can be able to provide the “philosophical conditions for pluralist democracy” to develop in Muslim societies (Hirschkind, 2008: 66).

At this point, the Janus-faced transformativeness idea plays an important role in explaining how a “religion can legitimately play a role” in politics (el-Fadl, 2005: 202). First, as argued by el-Fadl (2005), Bader (2003), and Shachar (2001), as the democratic reformation of political and institutional structures in recognising the public role of religion takes place in Muslim societies, more people are expected to reconcile “normative commitments to Islam as a comprehensive theory of the good and [their] political commitments to a liberal constitutional order” (Fadel, 2008: 9). Second, as argued by thinkers like el-Fadl and Mohammed Fadel, for religion to have a political role, it must become more closely aligned with human rights, pluralism, and toleration (el-Fadl, 2005: 202). Similar to Habermas’ religious modernisation idea, Fadel also concedes that both secular and religious citizens are expected to recognise pluralism and “the legitimacy of the numerous and often contradictory options that resulted from the exercises of moral judgement” (Fadel, 2008: 49). This involves the recognition that “reasonable non-Islamic [as well as dissenting Islamic] ways of life are nevertheless worthy of respect and constitutional protection, independent of the instrumental value of pluralism” (Fadel, 2008: 43).
Here it is also important to remember that recognising the worth of and respect for another comprehensive view does not mean endorsing it uncritically. Social Islam does not imply that orthodox Muslims have a presumptive moral obligation to reconciliation of their philosophical truth claims. What it indicates is that Muslims, like all other groups within the political system, have a moral duty to develop democratic toleration despite their ontological distinctions and differing interests. For instance:

This is not to say that...[Muslims] should be expected to...endorse gay marriage...[or] can be supposed to approve heterodox traditions of Islam....But Islamists can be expected to justify within their own values the legitimacy of these other groups’ political and civil liberties as equal to their own, for pluralistic democracy to take root (Somer, 2011: 538).

Democratic toleration necessitates that Muslims, like other citizens, recognise the right of individuals with diverse normative systems to observe freedoms as well as “the legitimacy of the numerous and often contradictory options that resulted from the exercises of moral judgement” in public debate (Fadel, 2008: 49).

In general, religious beliefs can play a positive role in the process of developing a democratic public sphere. Under the analytical frame of social Islam, I have defined the religious reformation necessary to allow for the formation of the moral foundation of the democratic public sphere. Although Habermas defends the need to share the burden of transition of religious argumentation in a ‘rational,’ ‘intuitive,’ and civil argumentative direction, he does not explicate this process in detail. With social Islam, I have addressed the development of the social public sphere independent of the state apparatus and religious authorities, which have significant potential to contribute to the philosophical conditions for the reformation of religious consciousness in favour of shared democratic life.

Another medium for the social public sphere, democratic toleration, will now be investigated in the next sub-section to demonstrate the notion of normative change in the making of the shared good and overlapping consensus as the basis of the public sphere.

c. The Establishment of Democratic Toleration

Democratic toleration is the third component of the social public sphere idea. It is the normative foundation of the social public sphere that enables the facilitation of different moral systems, protecting diverse views, and serving diverse interests. Democratic toleration is the shared normative commitment of citizens towards each other that reflects democratic consensus on respect, civility, and human rights despite their differing views and conflicting interests. In this project, the idea of democratic toleration, as inspired by Habermas, is brought together in the multiculturalism literature through the arguments of scholars such as
Taylor and Chandran Kukathas and enriched with the ideas of Muslim intellectuals like Mohammad Talbi and An-Na’im.

Kukathas defines toleration as people’s freedom to pursue one’s “various ends, individually or cooperatively” (1992: 108). According to Kukathas’ ‘multiculturalism as toleration’ theory, the liberal idea of toleration is the moral foundation of democracy and the basis for the justification of cultural, moral, or political pluralism (2003: 259). Likewise, Talbi, a prominent advocate of pluralism in Muslim political thought, advocates for normative religious acceptance and pluralism. Talbi states that human beings can “live together with our consciously assumed difference” through finding a “plateau” where “mutual respect and full acknowledgement of difference are attained” (Talbi, 1995a: 62; Filali-Ansari, 2009: 2). In this plateau, Talbi believes that some form of a “common denominator of a universal ethics” on the basis of toleration should be the foundation of collective life (Talbi, 1995b: 83).

Democratic toleration expects citizens to develop civility, recognising each other’s identities and difference and respecting each other’s rights to public presence. Democratic toleration can only emerge in a society where individuals with competing and different positions are consciously and responsibly engaged in a dialogue and compromise to establish an overlapping consensus on “common public values” and “the common good of all on a moral basis” (Maclure and Taylor, 2011: 12, 15). This amounts to accepting the peaceful coexistence with rival doctrines and developing a firm allegiance to the political ideals of the democratic civic culture (Mahcupyan, 2008: 110-112).

The social public sphere is “the site where contests take place over the definition of the ‘common good’” (Eickelman and Salvatore, 2002: 94). Within the social public sphere theory, the common good does not have to be thick to succeed. In fact, thin agreement “to develop an ethics of lived experience and practice” is more effective for developing a political consensus independent from a certain doctrine of transcendent(al) morality (Connolly, 2005: 116). In this context, democratic toleration and pluralism resulting from a firm statement of popular sovereignty and democratic participation shapes the shared normative foundation of the public sphere. In democratic toleration, the idea of divine morality as a source of personal salvation cannot dictate the outcome of political negotiation. Believers and atheists, the secular and the religious, and people of different ethnicities,

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1 According to Edward Shils, “[C]ivility is compatible with other attachments to class, religion, and profession, but it regulates them out of respect for the common good” (1997: 47).
cultural identities, and sexualities should all come together and engage to agree on the shared good (Connolly, 2005: 43). These actors should reach an agreement overcoming the endemic tension of “inter- and intra-religious domination” or ideological hegemony created within the public sphere (Bader, 2009a). Essentially, the social public sphere should harbour a range of moral and political perspectives in public deliberation, even though the majority may perceive some of these perspectives as “morally wrong” (Bader, 2003b: 114). Which perspective wins over the other in the process of achieving the shared good is decided through the broad deliberation within the various social forums of the public sphere. Yet no perspective is automatically more authoritative than others, and no perspective should be persecuted or criminalised. Very relevant to Muslim societies, the process of achieving the shared good “should be open and accessible to all citizens…without exposing themselves to charges of disbelief, apostasy or blasphemy” (An-Na‘im, 2009: 149).

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that for the overlapping consensus to have normative weight in individual adherents of diverse philosophical and religious sects, it needs to be “morally persuasive within their own system of moral, philosophical or religious commitments” (Fadel, 2008: 8; 2007: 4). Thus, the “accessibility” of religious and ethical logics/reasons and the reformative mechanisms mentioned under social Islam are essential for both the development and maintenance of the common good (Sachedina, 2009: 177). This is a major division point between the democratic toleration idea as conceptualised in this work and the religious toleration idea in Habermas’ theory. Habermas’ religious toleration idea still operates on a liberal discourse centred on Rawls’ account of public reason, where religious convictions and rational viewpoints are somehow dichotomous. Although Habermas accepts the possibility of certain religious argumentation, a rational or a civic understanding for religion—as a comprehensive moral doctrine—is highly unlikely for him. Thus, religious argumentation should be checked before the gates of the formal public sphere where a political and institutional impact is merited. The democratic toleration idea proposed here goes beyond a Rawlsian public reason and proposes a religiously friendly and normatively inclusive account of overlapping consensus and the shared good. The social public sphere idea is inclusive of religious voices and logics in public deliberation on the belief that each citizen should be involved in this ongoing democratic communication with their secular, religious, or traditional comprehensive worldviews to create a political consensus as the currency of social life. On this subject, Mookherjee argues that a democratic state is obliged to protect the “capacity for reason” for all citizens, guaranteeing their involvement in constructing the idea of the common good rather than imposing its own account
(Mookherjee, 2001: 79). The social public sphere notion rests on the conviction that citizens who might have “separate moral ontologies,” conflicting doctrines of the good, or certain metaphysical orientations can still “share a common normative basis” under a democratic system without avoiding these beliefs in the public deliberation (el-Fadl, 2004: 4). As Taylor has famously written, “citizens arrive at an ‘overlapping consensus’ about the basic political principles, despite the differing conceptions they embrace regarding what a successful life is” (Maclure and Taylor, 2011: 17).

Overall, the advocacy of a social public sphere is based on the belief that the consolidation of democracy requires a substantial normative support basis for democracy. The social public sphere promotes mass moral transformation by bringing individual moral judgements to a closer alignment with democratic toleration associated with civility and mutual respect as the basis of social life in Muslim societies. Democratic toleration can facilitate an inclusive and religiously-friendly public structure, increasing the probability of Muslim democratic consolidation.

The three conceptual mechanisms of social public sphere can engender a political environment that paves the way for the fourth, advanced feature of democratic politics: the institutionalisation of normative difference. At this stage, I will seek to articulate a structural turn in recognising moral difference by diversifying pluralistic jurisdictional and institutional arrangements.

d. Institutional Pluralism

Consideration of some kind of differentiation between the state and the public sphere ultimately opened up ways to think of institutional pluralism within democratic politics. This distinction is essential to pave the way to a workable resolution on the issue of the role of religion in the public sphere. The need to differentiate between the state public sphere and the social public sphere has derived from the rationale that even a morally minimalist state cannot be innocent of bias when dealing with real-world situations (Shachar, 2008: 575; Bader, 2003a: 4). Scholars like Shachar and Mégret have suggested that it is a delusion to think that the state can solely deliver satisfactory services for people with diverse needs deriving from substantially different worldviews (Mégret, 2012: 13; Shachar, 2001: 88). Accordingly, this sub-section will engage in providing a pluralistic alternative to the existing institutional structures with the aim of contributing to the resolution of the role of religion and politics. This synopsis will demonstrate how collective rights would work institutionally by diversifying public services and expanding the actors in public policy.
Conventionally, those who advocate religious accommodation, including Habermas, often restrict religion to the informal public sphere. This perspective implied the need for religious values to undertake a process of translation according to secular standards of rationality and thus the adoption of a single mode of communication in institutional (public) deliberation. However, in the social public sphere model advocated here, religious values and identities are allowed to influence public deliberation and organisation at an institutional level, reconciling both liberal and religious standards of rationality at an institutional level to consolidate societal harmony, human rights, tolerance, and respect. In other words, the institutional pluralism idea conceptualised in this work represents an expansion of religious freedoms for the accommodation of diverse—minority and majority alike—needs and interests. The social public sphere is understood as the terrain of diversity where collaboration of the state and voluntary public associations can deliver more extensive and complete services. It opens up administrative and economic opportunities for the public functions of religion at the hands of “democratically controlled voluntary associations” (Hirst, 1997: 13). Under institutional pluralism, citizens with diverse comprehensive philosophical doctrines have a “greater control of their affairs” in organising and funding public services and the welfare sector. Civil society actors, such as faith-based or cultural associations, can also be the service providers in various arenas of public life such as education, health care, seniors’ care, social work, and finance (Hirst, 1997: 13). Hence, the institutional pluralism of the social public sphere makes available diverse political platforms and broader social forums through which groups with distinct and divergent goods and interests have public presence and play public roles.

Such diversity also shapes the forms in which institutional pluralism is implemented in reality, for there is no single path to institutional pluralism and it is up to the processes undertaken in the social public sphere to determine the resulting collaboration between state and civil society. To take the real-life example of education, we can observe different models of institutional pluralism articulated in the literature. These include Veit Bader’s model of separate faith schools and Ayelet Shachar’s model of “power-dividing and sharing arrangements” (2008: 154). As a form of pluralist institutionalist arrangement, Bader has argued for separate faith-based schools, where religious groups are given institutional autonomy in education to have their own schools. Shachar, on the other hand, advocates for state schools providing a common education but giving religious groups the right to control religious instruction and curriculum, like in Germany and Austria. When it comes to
associational services, therefore, the social public sphere framework proposed here is aware of the importance of context specificity depending on the specific political experimentalism of a particular society and the already existing institutional designs in these societies (Shachar, 2009: 134). Even under predominantly Muslim contexts, the nature and characteristics of institutional pluralism can take various shapes and forms. Within institutional pluralism, how much power will be given to civil society actors and community-based organisations is not only a theoretical question but is one that is negotiated on a day-to-day basis. Issues like whether religious classes should be held within or outside civic schools, what the appropriate age for pupils to attend religious classes is, and how curricula should be organised and classes administered would be resolved differently. In some Muslim-majority contexts, separate faith schools might be the case while in others a power-sharing education structure may be more fit for democratic consolidation. Yet in order to resolve the state’s relation to social and religious affairs, some form of institutional pluralism seems necessary for the consolidation of Muslim democracy.

However, although the idea of empowering civil society against the state is vital for democratisation, it is also important to be prepared against the potential risk of empowering communities against individuals. Indeed, the social public sphere framework does not necessarily define civil society as ipso facto benign or tolerant. In other words, civil society and its prevailing normativity should not be viewed as inexorably more pluralist than the institutional establishment of the state, and this necessitates the protection of the rights and freedoms of individuals. Thus, institutional pluralism clearly requires higher regulatory mechanisms to ensure universal human rights standards. The morally minimalist liberal democratic state on this matter is seen as the reliable guarantor of human rights: while allowing a broad range of “governance of social affairs,” the morally minimalist state is to set democratic standards by critically scrutinising service provision to safeguard citizens’ basic rights and liberties (Hirst, 1994: 25). However, the concept of state intervention can also be restrictive if the state is seen as the only authority and the sole guarantor of rights and freedoms. Although morally minimalist, we must recognise that the state, or the people who are in positions of power, has its own interests, and it would be reductionist to assume that the state could always be impartial in supervising civil society associations. Accordingly, there are benefits to having national institutions supporting the state, institutions that are independent from the executive, legislative, and jurisdictional powers and which will thus facilitate the task of safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. In this regard, the idea of a fourth eye, or the institution of ombudsman to be formed by an amalgamation of
governmental authorities, civil society actors, academics, and specialists, which mediates between state institutions and civil society organisations, might offer an alternative solution. The task of an ombudsman is to protect rights and freedoms from pressures coming from within groups themselves, from other groups, as well as against state authority, if necessary. The ombudsman exercises an advisory role to state institutions by issuing reports, which are presented to the authorities as well as to the public, which in turn increasingly enhances the accountability of the executive (Yazici, 2011: 148-152). Religious scholars can also be ombudsmen, where the institution of nasiha (“morally corrective criticism”) in this case can function as a form of “reasoned criticism” (“the public use of reason”). In this context, religious scholars can issue expert suggestions, which are different from the authoritative opinion of the ulama class (Asad, 1993: 210).

In essence then, the framework of institutional pluralism advocated in this work aims to give voice and agency to both civil society and individuals alongside the state. It provides civil society with greater space to perform some of the functions of the state while simultaneously ensuring voluntariness and the freedom of citizens to choose among governmental and societal organisations through democratic mechanisms and constitutional safeguards. The social public sphere thus primarily aims to empower alternative communities and give them certain public credentials by institutionalising pluralism for several important reasons. First, it is believed that individuals should have a right to collective goods and the ability to fully pursue what they define as a good life. By promoting religious freedoms, institutional pluralism in fact enhances the autonomy and capacities of individuals with diverse normative systems. In addition, institutional pluralism can guarantee that all groups will have their own autonomous spheres, entailing that no particular school or fraternity of Islam would control or suppress less prominent opinions. Second, if groups and ideologies are excluded from political influence, they are likely to hijack democracy; they could either become reactionary by feeding extremism or revolutionary by infiltrating the state apparatus to impose their ideology and capture state power to reclaim authority. Third, it is important to distinguish between official recognition and actual presence: if religious or cultural ways of life are unrecognised, this does not mean that they are nonexistent. On this acknowledgement, as opposed to neglecting already existing practices, institutional pluralism would put minority group interactions under scrutiny and regulate the communal religious practices that remain unnoticed when unofficial, which in turn would facilitate the meaningful protection of the rights of the vulnerable members in these groups. Consequently, this framework that compels interaction between the state and these groups has the potential
for a more inclusive governing of a diverse citizenry and a more interactive mode of peaceful coexistence between the state and comprehensive moral doctrines as well as among groups with diverse normative systems, thus rendering democratic consolidation a greater possibility to become established.

But most importantly, institutionalising pluralism is essential because it facilitates normative democratic changes. As mentioned earlier, the social public sphere views the communicative and discursive processes of democratisation as crucial as institutional change, and it is in light of this that civil society becomes an important venue for democratisation when it is empowered within a context of strong universal human rights implementation. Only mass-level normative change in civil society can provide pluralistic political solutions and democratic progress. Accordingly, the social public sphere empowers a form of civil society that can work for everyone with its provision of equal share of rights and capacity in engaging public exchanges in order to foster a bottom-up democratic reconstruction. The democratic culture of equal participation, civic dialogue, and deliberation that the social public sphere creates would thus have greater potential to improve social interactions and resolve normative disputes residing in public life. In a setting of robust institutional and legal protections, the interactivity, frequency, and familiarity of diverse ideas, practices, and norms—even those which might be unorthodox or condemned—could eventually develop toleration and gain acceptance if their proponents are given the space to symbiotically interact and communicate with their opponents on equal grounds. Thus, the visibility and legality of political and moral differences are very important and they indirectly lead to the development of a tolerant civil society (and the construction of civility and democratic toleration). Therefore, by opening up the public sphere and delegating certain public powers to civil society, institutional pluralism facilitates democratic consolidation on both structural and normative grounds.

In this sense, the social public sphere framework endorses the idea that “better institutional design” with inclusive and safe public platforms that protect individual liberties and facilitate the functional roles of civil society will prop up “liberal democratic practices” and values (Volpi, 2004: 1074). Accordingly, institutional pluralism reorients the idea of institutional pluralism of multiculturalism, which was asserted within Western democracies, to adopt it in a Muslim-majority context with the help of theoretically relevant concepts. By and large, the social public sphere has offered conceptual resources to organise institutional pluralism, provided there is sufficient shared normative commitments to democratic toleration and human rights. This pluralism has a Janus-faced nature: On the one hand, it
aims to accommodate more traditional/shari’a-minded Muslims’ demands in ensuring them legal and institutional pluralist rights. On the other hand, it necessitates moral endorsement of pluralism by these Muslims in issues concerning human rights, freedom of speech, individual liberties, and other lifestyles. In other words, institutional pluralism involves more rights and autonomy for religious people, yet a democracy, in general, requires the moral endorsement to the ethos of pluralism by all.

III. Concluding Remarks

The expression “return of religion” refers to the heightened rethinking of the role of religion in contemporary political theory since the early 2000s, which has spawned new theorisations on the public sphere. As a prominent example, Jürgen Habermas’ post-secularism approach proposed an enlightened idea of secularism as opposed to anti-pluralist universal republican models commonly referred to as laicism. In Habermas’ theory, secularism is taken away from being a sacred moral ideology imposing a certain conception of the good upon citizenry to a thin moral good institutionally administering social coexistence and political organisation. In this model, citizens are bond together in difference without abstracting from their differences in the ‘informal public sphere’ where religious tolerance is the normative currency of collective life. Yet in Habermas’ theory, the possibility of religious individuals and groups having an institutional muscle and public autonomy is not really conceivable. However, for democracy to be consolidated in the Muslim world, I have argued that secularism should be reoriented more substantially than Habermas’ endeavour, so it can accommodate the role of Islam and the public claims and needs of Muslim peoples. On this matter, I have proposed an idea of the social public sphere, a distinct form of a political public sphere allocated for civil society politics that permits Muslims to live what they morally and rationally choose as a good life. The social public sphere is identified as unique relative to other democratic public space structures due to its capacity to adapt to the role of religion in civil society, where religious convictions at the hands of individual moral agents are hoped to take a more reformed route.

The ways in which the social public sphere can work and become consolidated is discussed through four conceptual components. The first feature of pluralist public sphere is transformativeness that defines a profound ideological transformation and value change towards democratisation both structurally and socially. Here, the relationship between liberal democracy and Islam does not imply an epistemological bias, solely asking Islam to be
compatible with liberal democratic institutions, but democratic institutions to be inclusive of religious needs and demands. Accordingly, transformativeness has captured the change in the character of the state towards more accommodating ends. It has implied finding institutions that give impartial access to public life and accommodating Islamic ways of life and its associational claims. A free and critical political space provided by institutional change is believed to foster the forces of transformativeness towards collective internalisation of pluralism and democratic tolerance. This value change reinforces the societal basis of Muslim democracy and is the best guarantor of it. The other components of the social public sphere are clauses that further demonstrate the idea of transformativeness.

The second concept of the social public sphere is social Islam that displays the processes in which Islam can be part of a democratic public sphere through people’s self-conscious and active understanding of Islamic guidance. It demonstrates the virtue of the grassroots development of democratic values that can offer viable potential to the development of a social public sphere in Muslim societies, where religion is a paramount factor in creating social, cultural, and ideological identities. Accordingly, social Islam shows how religion can progressively contribute to the civic development of the shared good, promoting democratic toleration.

As consistently emphasised, democracy is not only about institutional practices, regulations, or rules; it is also about processes and norms. Democratic toleration is the third component of the social public sphere idea that reflects the shared normative commitment to democratic consensus on respect, pluralism, and human rights, representing the normative formation of democratic consensus. Social Islam has demonstrated how individuals’ engagement with religion in a free and analytical manner is essential so that in return religion can become a part of consolidating overlapping consensus on democratic toleration. Symbiotically, democratic tolerance also maintains the religious arguments to be part of public contests over the definition of the shared good and religious people to have the public accessibility to pursue their vision of a good life. The social public sphere is the terrain where people can meaningfully engage with both deeply held religious beliefs and democratic values, allowing for a political organisation where Muslims who are committed to follow šārī‘a can be equally committed to the ethos of pluralism and the principles of democracy.

The fourth component is institutional pluralism, which envisages civil society functioning in the sense of a public sphere, which develops after the earlier three features of the social public sphere are established socially and institutionally. It envisages a public sphere where civil society organisations share institutional powers alongside the state in
delivering public services, which has the potential to serve the democratic consolidation in societies where the issue of moral diversity and the relationship between secularism and Islam require enlightened undertakings.

By and large, I brought together in a more systemic fashion various types of political philosophies on the public sphere into productive contact to develop an idea of the social public sphere that is particular to Muslim-majority societies, taking into consideration the specific role that Islam plays in these societies and the shared barriers ahead of genuine democratisation of the public sphere. This model is argued to have a better capacity to house moral diversity and pluralism and thus has the potential to work towards the democratic consolidation for certain reasons. The social public sphere has formulated new dimensions of the religious sphere in modern democracies, connecting private and public life while safeguarding and underpinning democratic principles of toleration, pluralism, and diversity. It has proposed an alternative notion to capture this empirical relationship, especially in a direction serving towards democratic consolidation within Muslim-majority contexts. The social public sphere is articulated as pluralistic to accommodate dominant and non-dominant outlooks and their legitimate public rights, beyond the domination of the state or the dominant moral discourses. First, it welcomes comprehensive moralities as legitimate forces, allowing public space for the diversity of lifestyles, whether professed by majority or minority groups, to be practised out of volition. Then, by ensuring the separation of religion and governance, it also aims to maintain the state public sphere as morally minimalist and impartial towards all citizens. It is based on devolution of moral and spiritual authorities from the state to the institutions and practices of the social public sphere. Essentially, the social public sphere can provide an effective alternative to resolve the Islamic–secularist clash impeding democratisation efforts in Muslim contexts by equally including both religious and secular forces into political processes. It seeks to overcome the complex dilemma Muslim societies have been exposed to in which:

- either religion strives to colonize and subjugate worldly politics, thereby erecting itself into a public power, or else politics colonizes religious faith by expanding itself into a totalizing, quasi-religious panacea or ideology (Dallmayr, 2011: 439).
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