

Francois Gauthier, *Religion, Modernity, Globalisation: Nation-State to Market* (London: Routledge, 2020), 332 pp.

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How do we understand today, the nature and social location of religion? Francois Gauthier takes readers through a formidable tour, in which he argues that the social sciences have blinded themselves with the secularization paradigm, which, as it is currently understood contains three distinct propositions: social differentiation, religious decline, and privatization. For him, these three propositions are problematic. Instead, he proposes to understand the mutation of religion against the rise of consumerism and neoliberalism. In the last few years, he, along with Roberto Cipriani (2017), and Mohamad Bamyeh (2019), Armando Salvatore (1997), have pointed out the resilience of religions worldwide, and critiqued some trends within the sociology of religion that sought killing religion (at least as values) while studying it. Gauthier criticizes substantive definitions of religion and how this field of sociology has been obsessed with the sole perspective of decline, while other research – particularly in the Global South – shows how the situation is profoundly different in this part of the world, and diffracted into a multiplicity of practices. For him, “the concept of the secular and the religion/secular couple is profoundly ideological and is grounded in the modern aspiration to found itself against ‘religion’ (i.e. Christianity and its institutions) in order to build a utopian ‘autonomous’ society in which individuals could find morality within themselves rather than through the prescriptions of external authorities, be they political or religious” (p. 16).

Gauthier’s book is the fruit of his long career as a sociologist of religion, and a culmination of his empirical work, especially in Indonesia. It is composed of two parts: the first is theoretically based, and consists of eight chapters, and the second, consisting of two chapters, includes a collection of case studies (the majority of which focus on Islam in Indonesia, Pentecostalism in Latin America, and Catholicism in Europe).

The book is an outstanding contribution to social theory that goes beyond simply understanding religion in terms of its relationship to society. As an anti-utilitarian sociologist, he critiques our vision of society as consisting of differentiated, separate compartments (one of which being religion). Gauthier’s opposition to this differentiation of social spheres reflects his inspiration from Marcel Mauss’ “total social fact” approach, and Karl Polanyi’s “embeddedness”. Combining them, Gauthier seeks to understand how the spheres of religion, culture, politics, social, and economics are traversed by common logics; logics which not only allow a given society to be encompassed in its *totality*, but see gift-giving practices as an overarching anthropological logic innate within social relationships. Before doing this, however, Gauthier offers many arguments to first convince us that there has been a passage from a politically-embedded, National-Statist regime to a Global-Market one in which economics now play a structuring, embedding role. By “regime”, he means a “macro-level ideal-type of social regulation that allows for comparative analyses and the objectivation of social realities” (p. 4). In his discussion regarding society, he thus questions the Western conceptualization of modernity – which is often thought of in terms of institutions within the Westphalian nation-state frame.

Gauthier gives a new outlook to the link between religion and economics, while simultaneously thinking about the shift towards the Global-Market regime. He formulates strong criticism of two interrelated epistemological trends: the “Rational Choice” approach to religion (most notably through the Chicago School with Gary Becker, which became mainstream in American sociology of religion and subsequently disseminated worldwide); and the postmodern view of fragmented spheres.

Rather than an integrated whole, this second view is better thought of as a rhizome of networks, as if we lived in some sort of transient and formless era – something provided terminology like “religion in bits and pieces”, or “à la carte religion.” In Gauthier’s words, the postmodern view is that “which gives the impression of a freely (liberal!) choosing subject, does give us a clue as to the organizing principle behind all of this fragmentation: Market economics” (p. 173). A good example of this trend can be seen in Danièle Hervieu-Légers *La religion en miettes ou la question des sects* (2001), in which she shows how minimalism has become religiosity, and relates it to ceremonies (like marriage and funerals) rather than everyday ritual practice. If religiosity degree of a group exceed that, this group becomes a *sect* undermining the societal cohesion and laicity.

Religion and marketisation

For Gauthier, the recent changes that have affected religion can best be understood against marketization (i.e., the backdrop of the combined emergence of ‘consumerism’ and ‘neoliberalism’). And this takes different forms. For instance, we have witnessed the *lifestylisation* of religion, where many choose to practice a form of religiosity through new ‘low-threshold’ practices (like meditation, mysticism, festivals, pilgrimages, laying of hands healing techniques, and female worship) over attending physical places of worship. The amazing rise of Global Pentecostalism is an example that fits perfectly into this Global-Market mold.

For Gauthier, the impact of marketization on religion is having opposing interpretations: one where secular scholars denounce the religious instrumentalization of the market, and produce relatively widespread research concerning the exponential development of halal and ‘sharia-friendly’ products worldwide. This is often seen as a manipulation; one that is caused by the combination of globalized markets and fundamentalist currents, which seek to disseminate fanatic and ideological projects. Gauthier rightly points out two works in this regard: a study by Gilles Kepel (2017) highlighting the *salafisation* of *halal* in France, and Faegheh Shirazi’s book, *Brand Islam*. In this latter work, Shirazi presents a variation on this theme, where she similarly denounces the instrumentalization and ‘exploitation’ of Islam by morality-devoid, profit-seeking market actors who promote ‘false halal’ products and ‘*hijabi* dolls’, as if “the purity of the market (and of the secular in general) is co-opted and soiled by religion” (p. 177). The second interpretation worries about the reverse trend, meaning the dangers of ‘commodification’ for religion. It warns of the impacts consumer culture is having on Christianity and other religious traditions. Here, the purity of religion is threatened by the sullyng potential of evil market forces.

Instead of these two above perspectives, and instead of opposing an economic logic against a religious one, Gauthier proposes an alternative, holistic approach - where marketization is not approached as a dynamic that affects social spheres (or sub-systems) in isolation from one another. In fact, he defines marketization as the underlying process by which social spheres are embedded in the 'economic', via the idea and functioning of the 'market', against a global backdrop. For him, neo-liberalization and consumerization are two paradigmatically coextensive, yet theoretically distinct processes. The first affects religion, mostly via the political and the societal (i.e., on the institutional and organizational levels), which will emphasize *utilitarian individualism*. The second affects culture and the social (i.e., on the ethos level; that being cultural ideologies and practices), which will bring *expressive individualism*.

Gauthier highlights how neo-liberalism impacts the public/private division by seriously eroding the social and welfare mission of the nation-state. Disengagement from the national economy and social services has opened up as many areas to the non-profit and entrepreneurial sectors, and this, in turn has opened new possibilities for religious institutions, movements, and organizations – known as Faith-Based Initiatives (FBIs) – in the provision of such services. This is absolutely true when I look at the Arab world, where Islamic FBIs have built neighborhood schools, provided help with housing and marriage, and fostered charitable endowments (mutual aid) – all of which has facilitated, their active participation in outright political (and in some cases militant) activism. Overall, religion is changing the economy as much as the latter is changing religion.

Hyper-mediatization

In chapter seven, Gauthier follows Stig Hjarvard's "mediatization thesis" regarding religion, arguing that mediatization transforms religion in three major ways. First, media becomes the primary source of information on religion. Second, media shapes religious information and experiences in conformity with the demands of popular media genres. And, finally, media constitutes social and cultural environments that take over many of the functions of institutionalized religions, such as providing moral and spiritual guidance, and a sense of community. For him, while this marketing of religion has reinforced the turn towards experiential and personal religiosity, the competition between faiths has also tended to promote entertainment, and, as a result, has blurred the boundaries between religion and culture.

To the detriment of former institutional or traditional forms of authority, this hyper-mediatization and global market will foster the extraordinary rise of charismatic types of authority. And this shift is tied to a corollary trend, where personal experience is seen as reflective of how one measures truth and authenticity. Examples reported within Islam, for instance, are figures like Egyptian Amr Khaled, or the Indonesian Abdullah Gymnastiar, who have supplanted traditional religious authorities. As such new sources of authority arise, often from the business and media world, traditional religious expressions and formerly powerful religious institutions and organizations are being contested as legitimate sources of religious authority. For Gauthier, this has happened everywhere in the world (but, as I will argue at the end of this review, poignantly so in the Arab world).

The changes in the relationships between the state and society entail important changes in relations between the state and religion, where the latter is simultaneously de-institutionalized and “downgraded from its former medial position and upgraded within the dynamics of governance, where it is considered as a partner” (p. 287). For Gauthier, this connection can call into question the total separation between private and public, or religious and secular.

Reading the religious manifestations as mixed phenomena

The whole book of Gauthier is an invitation to read religious manifestations as mixed phenomena (i.e., blending politics and religion, management and religion, entertainment and religion, tourism and religion, fashion and religion, consumption and religion, marketing and religion, finance and religion, and so forth). Rather than understand them “as assimilations of one pole by the other or reversely”, one should see “that their novelty and symbolic efficacy resides specifically in this interbreeding, which, in turn, can better be understood from a holistic rather than a differentiated perspective” (p. 215). In the same vein, one should not see a religion, whether Islam or another, as political (see my criticism to the current debate in France about “political Islam” [Hanafi 2020]). Looking to a new wave of studying Islamic economics (which goes beyond the former wave, that simply provides Islamic financial products), Islam, especially in South Asia, has contributed to shaping capitalism as much as capitalism has reshaped the former National-Statist Islam(s). Gauthier correctly put it that “[c]onsumerism has penetrated whole segments of the population through the development of Islamic consumption, and neoliberal reforms have been made acceptable, even inescapable, through the promotion of work as a means to please God” (p. 288).

As such, embedded social and political processes are more in the global market than they are in the nation-state, and they galvanize the conservative and protective forces that wish to reinstate a strong state and a homogenous nation – which is what gave rise to populism today. Religion is a central part of the identity of many individuals, where any threat to one's religious beliefs is considered a threat to one's very being. This is a primary motivation for ethno-religious nationalists. However, at the same time, the rise of social movements, and the constitution of civil society as an important political actor, have signaled the erosion in the state's capacity to perform what was once its foundational and regulative function in the Nation-State regime – and religion has become one of these civil society actors.

Two concerns

I have two concerns to formulate here: one about the extent to which Gauthier's theoretical contribution can be applied to the Arab world, and the second about his criticism to the secularization paradigm.

First, the nation-state regime is not completely dead when it comes to the relationship between religion and other social spheres, especially the political sphere. What we are currently witnessing in the Arab world is a shift from an emphasis on the Islamic *umma*, to an emphasis on nation-state affairs. The support (or at least, the passive attitude) of the Moroccan Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) for normalizing relationships with Israel – which has been justified by arguing for the primacy of Moroccan affairs over the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – clearly shows how important the nation-state political imaginary is for such Islamist movements.

The Arab world is witnessing multiple dynamics concerning Nation-State and the Market and the local religious institutions remain very important despite the concurrence of new preachers such as Amr Khaled.

Second, Gauthier sometimes makes sweeping generalizations in his criticism of secularization, secularism, post-secularism, and multiple secularities. Readers are given the feeling that he throws the baby out with the bathwater. As long as separation between religious institutions and state institutions are securing liberal democratic ideals, and as long as the neutrality of a state is restricted to reply only to the notion of the good, secularism will remain important (Laborde 2017). We should keep looking at what Rajeev Bhargava has called “principled distance” between state and religion – that being a proper distance based on the principle of equity, and that favors the values of peace, universal rights, dignity, freedom, equality, and fraternity.

Overall, Gauthier’s book is a major breakthrough and landmark in the sociology of religion, and I impatiently look forward to reading his announced forthcoming publication, which seeks to unfold how religion manages to be at the very center of the dynamics within which market ideologies and consumerism have become enculturated, acculturated, legitimized, and contested, outside of the West.

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