The Dialogues have also addressed the complex and in some ways paradoxical relationship of sexual politics with institutionalized religion and communities of faith. As with other topics, somewhat different emphases and inflections characterized the different meetings, again reflecting both the particular regional dynamics and the professional interests of the participants and organizers. Several participants noted — and a few echoed — the widespread view that this relationship is essentially antagonistic. This perception in part responds to concrete political dynamics playing out on the ground in various countries, where the principal opponents to sexual rights are often motivated primarily by extreme or dogmatic religious beliefs. But it also reflects the roots of sexual rights in the tradition of liberalism and their common articulation with the language of secularism and *laïcité*. Given this entanglement with liberalism, it is not surprising that the political deployment of religious frames partially overlaps with the rights-versus-culture dichotomy highlighted at the African Regional Dialogue, discussed above, or operates in parallel ways.

At the Latin American Regional Dialogue, for example, the defense of *laïcité* as a political strategy sparked considerable contention, with some participants reiterating its importance, broadly affirmed by sexual rights advocates in the region, and others raising questions about its limits and potential risks. Participants at both the Latin American and African meetings countered the secularist position by underscoring the need to recognize a plurality of voices within communities of faith. At the Asian Regional Dialogue, while some participants alluded to clashes between sexual rights advocates and
religious authorities in specific national contexts, the broader question of sexual rights advocates' relation to religion was addressed indirectly and not in great detail. Broadly speaking, four major threads of discussion on religion emerged at the meetings: (1) the importance of religious pluralism; (2) a trend in many societies toward growing conservatism heavily influenced by religious belief systems; (3) contemporary re-articulations and transformations of conservative religious activism; and (4) the promises as well as the challenges of secularism as a political stance.

Recognizing religious pluralism

Both the Latin American and African Regional Dialogues highlighted the need to recognize and articulate ties with religious communities and cultivate faith-based arguments that might challenge patriarchy and heteronormativity as a priority. Indeed, questioning the presumed opposition between religion and sexual rights, participants emphasized that activists in various countries are already undertaking such efforts.

At the Latin American meeting, participants underscored the growing heterogeneity of the religious field in a region where, for example, Protestants now represent over 15 percent of the population in at least 10 countries. Against this backdrop, some noted, Afro-Latin American religions are generally more open to participants who break with dominant gender and sexual norms than Catholic and Evangelical churches (Fry, 1982; Vidal Ortiz, 2006). LGBT churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church present in nine countries in the region, as well as the regional network of Catholics for Choice, which participates in a regional project called the Campaign against Fundamentalisms, have explored ways to articulate sexual and reproductive rights with theological discussions and within communities of faith. Since the 1970s, Latin American feminist theologians,

30 Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá, Uruguay (Oro & Ureta, 2007).
finding inspiration in both the feminist movement and liberation theology, have advanced critical readings of scripture that open possibilities for more egalitarian gender relations (Vélez 2001; Tomita 2010). Engaging these critical theologies in his presentation at the Dialogue, Father Elias Mayer Vergara (2011) of the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil also pointed to the importance of ecumenical spaces such as the Latin American Council of Churches, founded in 1982. The Council brings together 150 churches from throughout the region as spaces where “alternative visions” of sexuality can develop through dialogue across religious traditions. Indeed, even within churches with official stances against sexual and reproductive rights, the story is often more complicated than it seems. The significant gap between official Catholic doctrine and the everyday beliefs and practices of many Catholics in the region was cited as evidence of greater plurality within the Catholic Church and of the limits of the Catholic hierarchy’s official authority.

Along similar lines, in her presentation on religion and culture at the African Dialogue, the activist Asma’u Joda, of the Centre for Women and Adolescent Empowerment (Nigeria), also underscored theological currents affirming views supportive of sexual rights and feminist principles within both Christian and Islamic traditions. With regard to Islam in particular, she noted that it is “a very sexual religion” and that the Quran and the Hadiths contain extensive discussions of sexuality and numerous precepts that affirm women’s empowerment. In particular, she recalled the tradition of interpretation (ijtihad), which opens the possibility for multiple interpretations of doctrine. In ways that paralleled the discussions at the Latin American Regional Dialogue, Joda similarly pointed to efforts by Muslim organizations to engage these discussions, noting, for example, the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) and GREFELS, in Senegal. Among the global and regional initiatives that Joda cited, the International Solidarity Network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) funded the Women and Law Project, which involved research in 18 Muslim countries and gave birth to such organizations as Baobab for Women’s Human Rights and the Centre for Women and Adolescent Empowerment in Nigeria, among others. Similarly, Musawah: The Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family, launched in 2009, seeks to
“[combine] the Islamic, human rights, constitutional and lived realities of women and men in our communities”. She also noted the work of the Safra Project, based in the United Kingdom, which strives “to bring out passages in the Quran and Ahadiths that recognize homosexuality and thus challenge heterosexual claims of being the sole legitimate groups within Islam,” as well as Positive Islam South Africa, which brings together Muslims living with HIV/AIDS. “Religion is indeed culture”, Joda affirmed; in keeping with the understanding of culture as a fluid terrain discussed above, she suggested that all major religious traditions “are subject to local interpretations and understandings that change from one community to another”. There “is no one way of practicing any of these religions”, Joda concluded.

The growth of dogmatic religious forces

Despite — or perhaps because of — this evidence of diversity and openness to change in certain religious circles, dominant trends in religious politics are moving in a quite different direction. Discussions at all the dialogues called attention to the growing mobilization of opposition to sexual rights and a tendency toward greater religious conservatism or even dogmatism in many countries in all three regions, very often (though by no means always) impelled by religious activists and authorities (see Freston, 2004, 2008). At the Asian Regional Dialogue, for example, Dède Oetomo underscored this trend toward greater conservatism among religious authorities in Indonesia. Oetomo drew a contrast between state recognition of warias under the Suharto dictatorship, which was enacted in consultation with the recently created Council of Islamic Clerics, and the contemporary situation of repression and discrimination faced by warias in the province of Aceh, where Shari’a was adopted and warias are commonly harassed by local police.31 The conditions prevailing in Aceh are in part an effect of the decentralization policies adopted in the course of Indonesian

democratization since 2003 in an attempt to overcome the strong centralism of the Suharto regime (Siapno, 2011). These developments highlight the fact that there are no linear and easy correlations between the features of a political regime and state recognition and regulation of sexual identities. Indeed, they suggest that processes of formal democratic reform, while in principle opening greater political space for sexual rights advocates, can paradoxically also prove to be a double-edged sword by simultaneously strengthening opponents who can use religion to mobilize a larger political base.

Along similar lines at the African Regional Dialogue, Codou Bop, from the Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois au Sénégal (GREFELS), pointed out that despite the long history of acceptance of homosexuality in Senegal, a magazine report on a supposed gay wedding in 2008 prompted an unprecedented wave of homophobia that included daily media coverage of the topic. The president of an Islamist political party and a coalition of conservative Muslim organizations, motivated in part by the expectation of electoral gains, pushed this campaign (see also Bop, 2008). Once again, moves toward a formally more democratic polity paradoxically created incentives for political actors to mobilize religious and nationalist identities in opposition to sexual rights.

Participants at the Latin American Regional Dialogue explored similar trends and actually addressed the question of religion most extensively among all the dialogues. This emphasis responded in good measure to the continued political weight of the Catholic Church in most of the region’s countries, a legacy of colonialism. The Church retains its status as the official state religion in Argentina and Costa Rica and special privileges in areas like state financing or public education in several other countries (including the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, Paraguay, Panama). Even in countries like Mexico, with a strong tradition of secularism, Church influence is

32 The Suharto regime’s recognition of warias resonates in many ways with the situation prevailing in Iran, where access to sex reassignment was authorized very early in time by Khomeini and today is applied as corrective therapy for sexual and gender variance and ambiguity, while homosexuality remains anathema and criminalized.
exercised informally, and Church authorities continue to play a powerful role in public life. In his overview paper on religion presented at the Latin American Regional Dialogue (included in Volume I), Juan Marco Vaggione recognized the long history of entanglement between religious and political authorities in the region, rendering laicization “partial or incomplete in most countries”.

But Vaggione also highlighted transformations in the Church’s engagement with politics today, noting the convergence of two phenomena that have reshaped its public presence. First, in the context of the processes of democratic reform that have swept the region since the 1980s, the Church has increased its role in public life. Influenced by doctrinal changes enacted at the Second Vatican Council, Church leaders have thus taken advantage of the new political space opened for participation, enjoying renewed legitimacy in many countries due to the stance taken by progressive sectors of the Church in pro-democracy movements. Second, this increased participation in public life has coincided with what Vaggione calls its “reactive politicization”, referring to the reorientation of its political priorities toward stopping or reversing the advances made by sexual rights movements in recent decades. This is a regional expression of a larger global trend. As the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI made concerted efforts to weaken the most progressive sectors of the Church, the Vatican has created new institutions like the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Pontifical Academy for Life, putting its battle against the so-called “culture of death” at the top of its political agenda. The Church, of course, has claimed a privileged role in dictating sexual morality in Latin America since the inception of Iberian colonial projects. What makes its contemporary articulations different, as Vaggione notes, is the dual role it now seeks to play, both as a religious institution claiming a privileged status vis-à-vis other religions, based on these deep historic roots, and also as one among many actors in civil society claiming a legitimate role in democratic public debate. This bimodal engagement with politics has made countering its influence particularly difficult, and it is precisely in policies related to sexuality, Vaggione concludes, that this influence is greatest.

Two recent developments have further complicated this political terrain in complex and contradictory
ways. The widespread sex scandals that have overtaken the Church in the early twenty-first century have in some instances served to weaken its position and created potential opportunities for sexual rights advocacy. Yet the effects of the appointment of the first Latin American pope, Argentinian Pope Francis, who has adopted a more “tolerant” and benign tone on matters of sexuality while maintaining the Church’s long-held positions condemning homosexuality and abortion, remain to be seen.

Conservative rearticulations

A second common theme to emerge at all the dialogues was a focus on contemporary transformations of conservative religious activism. In this respect, Vaggione identified a “mimetic quality” in the organizational and discursive strategies adopted by conservative activists and sexual rights movements. In some instances, this strategic convergence represents a direct response to sexual rights advocacy (or an extension of the Church’s reactive politicization) and in others a response to common structural changes reshaping activism and politics writ large. Again, this phenomenon was most extensively addressed at the Latin American meeting, though the tendencies discussed there have a larger global dimension that became evident at the other meetings as well.

Discursively, Vaggione highlighted a shift evident in many countries in Latin America, where conservative activists have increasingly adopted discourses of human rights, natural law, and science to frame their political positions in secular and universalist terms. This shift from scriptural argumentation toward universalist language in part reflects changes within churches themselves, most notably, the Catholic Church’s embrace of freedom of conscience and human rights in its encyclical Dignitatis Humanae, issued at the Second Vatican Council, a move that implicitly “[abandoned Catholicism’s] compulsory character” (Casanova, 1994, p. 72). But as Vaggione suggested, the shift also reflects a “strategic secularism”, as activists have adapted to the hegemonic terms of political debate in order to open spaces that might otherwise be closed to them and to find greater
resonance in public opinion.

In his presentation at the Latin American Dialogue, for instance, the political scientist Jaris Mujica pointed to the work of CEPROFARENA (the Center for Promotion of the Family and the Regulation of Fertility), Human Life International’s affiliate in Peru, founded in 1981 and currently one of the most important conservative NGOs in the country. Once headed by former health minister Fernando Carbone, the organization has been particularly active in medical and public health circles, advancing a purportedly scientific discourse to support public policies defending the “traditional family” and restricting access to contraception. The Declaration of Lima, issued at the Second International Pro-Life Congress organized by CEPROFARENA in 2005, thus cited purportedly scientific evidence that life begins at conception in arguing that the human rights of the unborn should be protected. Needless to say, this secular turn in religious activism also poses a new dilemma for sexual rights activists in the region, whose most common response to conservative religious mobilization has been a stalwart defense of the secular state, arguably pointing both to the political successes of this strategy and to its possible limits, as we elaborate below.

Organizationally, like sexual rights advocates, conservative sectors have experienced a parallel process of NGOization and transnationalization, articulating linkages not only regionally but also with the Holy See and the religious right in the United States. Vida Humana Internacional, the Miami-based affiliate of Human Life International, for example, was founded in 1984 to articulate work among its affiliates in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain. In recent years, the organization has promoted the creation of the Latin American Network of Priests and Seminarians for Life and the Latin American Network of Women’s Support Centers, to increase regional coordination in efforts to restrict access to abortion.33 Reflecting a certain thematic specialization, as Mujica suggested

in the Latin American Dialogue, the Latin American Alliance for Life (ALAFA), with headquarters in Caracas, Venezuela, has focused work on religious and sex education. The boundaries separating NGOs from formal church structures can be permeable. Both the founder of ALAFA, Cristina de Marcellus de Vollmer, and her husband, Alberto Vollmer Herrera, the former Venezuelan ambassador to the Holy See, for instance, are also lay members of the Vatican Pontifical Family Council (González Ruiz, 2005). What we see, then, is a reconfiguration of conservative religious activism in the region, operating primarily through NGOs and loosely coordinated transnational policy networks. As with sexual rights activism, this process of NGOization implies the embrace of an organizational form that enjoys legitimacy in national and international public spheres while facilitating access to funding. At the same time, national and transnational networks can bring together various types of organizations (i.e., churches of various denominations, NGOs, funders, legislative caucuses, and political parties) in ways that permit flexibility in mobilizing around campaigns or particular events as well as a certain functional and thematic specialization.

The discursive and organizational transformations that Vaggione and Mujica identified at the Latin American Dialogue have broader global dimensions. Since at least the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, global networks of religious leaders and activists began mobilizing to counter the advances advocates of sexual and reproductive rights have made in international circles, reflecting a “reactive politicization” unfolding at the global level. The Vatican, for example, has worked with the Organization of the Islamic Conference and NGOs associated with the religious right in the United States to block discussions at the United Nations addressing violence committed against individuals for their sexual orientation or gender expression.

Conservative activists have also established transnational spaces like the World Congress of Families to help consolidate a sort of “ecumenical conservatism” (Jones, Azparren, & Polischuk, 2010). In doing so, they have also adopted discursive strategies that bracket particular religious dogmas that might spark conflict within these alliances, such as the emphasis placed on the nuclear family.
as opposed to extended families as a universal model of the “natural family”. They have also embraced strategically secular frames that might find resonance across religious traditions and national contexts, including critiques of sexual rights as a neocolonial imposition emanating from the global North (Buss & Herman, 2003). In various African countries, US-based conservative Protestant Evangelical organizations have promoted the formation of local affiliates and transnational ties, thus “Africanizing the local leadership of their operations” while “leveling charges of neocolonialism against Western governments and international human rights groups” (Kaoma, 2012, p. iii).

In 2009 and 2010, for example, the American Center for Law and Justice opened two offices on the continent: the East African Center for Law and Justice in Kenya and the African Center for Law and Justice in Zimbabwe, with the aim of lobbying African parliaments “to take the Christian’s views into consideration as they draft legislation and policies” (Kaoma, 2013, p. vii). Such institutions have disseminated the language of US “culture wars” on the continent, advancing measures to tighten laws against homosexuality and recognize life from the moment of conception. At the continental level, these waves of US based Evangelism interweave with the local conservative voices of the Anglican Church — which for some years have threatened to sever ties with Canterbury because of its acceptance of LGBT identities and rights — as well as with dogmatic Catholic forces. These dynamics in combination with economic and geopolitical factors explain the recent adoption of draconian anti-homosexuality laws in Uganda and Nigeria that have led to mob attacks and incarceration of sexual dissidents (Petchesky, forthcoming).

One must, of course, keep in mind both the diversity within these alliances and the fact that not all religious activists belong to them or align with their goals. Even so, as a counterpoint to the transnational networks of sexual rights advocates, the emergence of these transnational articulations speaks to the formation of different global communities advancing competing normative visions of the sex–gender order and political projects to realize them. Such transnational networks, again, are marked by power asymmetries, and the political projects they advance have found variable
expression in different national contexts, a reflection of power dynamics playing out both within national polities and within these transnational networks themselves.

A good example of this phenomenon raised at both the African and Asian Regional Dialogues is the impact of the so-called “ABC strategy” (Abstain, Be Faithful, Use Condoms). Originating in the abstinence-only approach to sex education advocated by the religious right in the United States since the 1980s, the model was given considerable impetus globally through its incorporation into the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR).34 US President George W. Bush signed PEPFAR into law in 2003, committing $15 billion dollars to the global fight against AIDS. Advancing a fundamentally faith-based approach to AIDS prevention and sexual morality enforced through the “soft power” of funding conditionalities, PEPFAR used the same model as the “global gag rule” already applied by the administration to organizations that provide abortion services. In this version, PEPFAR regulations stipulated that US funds could not be used by any group that “does not have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking” (Oliver, 2012). In 2006, the program mandated that 33 percent of all prevention funds and two-thirds of those directed to prevention of sexual transmission be directed to “abstinence or fidelity programs” (Oliver, 2012; Santelli, Speizer, & Edelstein, 2013).

In India, as Jayashree Ramakrishna noted at the Asian Regional Dialogue, the prohibitions instituted in PEPFAR resonated with conservative elements from various religious groups in Indian society, leading to a marginalization of condoms in public health strategies. As she observed: “Decisions taken by powerful countries do not remain confined to their programs but soon find their way into other international and national programs. NACO [the National AIDS Control Organisation] too

34 Evertz (2010) traces the roots of the ABC model to early efforts to curb teen pregnancy advanced by the religious right in the United States, finding an early expression in the Adolescent Family Life Act that was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. That law called for “family-centered” programs that “promote chastity and self-discipline” (p. 7). See also Corrêa, Petchesky and Parker, 2008.
subscribed to this ideology and included this language in its policy and program documents”.

Finding resonance in the larger society, this relative marginalization of condoms found “little protest” outside of civil society organizations working in the areas of HIV and sexual health. Among the deleterious consequences of PEPFAR’s implementation in India was the destabilization of local HIV prevention efforts, particularly among organizations of sex workers. In its hugely problematic though not uncommon conflation of sex work with human trafficking, PEPFAR reinforced local “raid, rescue, and rehabilitation schemes” targeting sex worker organizations doing prevention work (Ahmed & Seshu, 2012, p. 150). Among the organizations targeted by such actions were Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP), a sex worker collective in Sangli, India, as well as its parent organization SANGRAM. In 2004, an attack launched on both organizations “under the guise of implementing the ‘prostitution pledge’ … was sanctioned by PEPFAR … illustrating how externally imposed neocolonial ‘laws’ could be used to echo the hangover of colonial forms of repression in the name of cultural/political ‘security’” (Ramasubban, 2007, p. 114).

In Nigeria as well, the implementation of PEPFAR has relied on articulations with local faith-based organizations (FBOs) and government officials. In 2004, over 30 FBOs and NGOs created the Nigerian Abstinence Coalition, an affiliate of the US-based Abstinence Clearinghouse, to advance projects promoting abstinence and fidelity. PEPFAR Nigeria encourages local FBOs to apply for funds and mobilizes religious leaders to incorporate abstinence-based prevention messages into sermons delivered at churches and mosques (Jappah, 2013). While the increased resources invested in combating HIV and AIDS have helped save lives, particularly in areas like mother-to-child transmission and blood screening (Jappah, 2013), the effectiveness of abstinence-focused prevention programs is highly questionable, in part because the approach fails to respond to the needs and realities experienced by many groups in society, particularly youth (Oliver, 2012; Santelli, Speizer, & Edelstein, 2013; Evertz, 2010). Adenike Esiet, from Action Health Incorporated (Nigeria), addressed some of these failures in her presentation at the African Regional Dialogue.
Esiet specifically highlighted the failure of what she called the “Don’ts Framework” to respond to the needs of Nigerian youth. Young people between the ages of 15 and 24, she noted, represent a significant percentage of new HIV cases in the country and account for over 60 percent of the complications from unsafe abortions (only legal in Nigeria when a pregnancy threatens the life of the woman). The Don’ts Framework, she argued, does not address larger structural factors like poverty linked to higher risk of infection; stereotypes adolescents as victims or villains without taking into account their real-life experience; and in particular, fails to acknowledge female sexual agency, in this regard reinforcing social norms that increase girls’ vulnerability to infection. Esiet concluded that what is crucially needed is a move toward a “pleasure framework” that could transcend the narrow focus on “risk” and in particular empower adolescent girls.

The promises and traps of laicité and secularism

Participants at the dialogues also addressed the question of secularism and its place in contemporary sexual politics. The issue was discussed extensively at the meeting in Latin America, where the defense of the principles of laicité has become a central strategy for sexual rights advocates across the region. Somewhat surprisingly, it was not raised at the other meetings. Its importance in Latin America, as Vaggione noted, is evidenced not only in national politics, but also in regional campaigns. At the World Social Forum in 2002, a coalition of feminist groups launched the Campaign against Fundamentalisms, People are Fundamental. Coordinated by the Marcosur Feminist Articulation of Uruguay, the campaign sought to disseminate a message repudiating both religious and market fundamentalisms. In 2006, a group of activists and academics from various countries launched the Ibero-American Network for Secular Liberties, an initiative that seeks to foster research on and promote the defense of “civil liberties, especially sexual and reproductive rights, within the
framework of benefits provided by the secular state”. 35 This emphasis on the defense of laicité, as it had been established after independence in the nineteenth century, is understandable in light of the disproportionate political influence exercised by the Catholic Church in most of the region and, in some countries, the political turn of a growing presence of Protestant evangelical churches.

Yet, this secularist strategy also poses certain dilemmas. In this regard, Vaggione underscored the need to move beyond the defense of the secular state or laicité to develop a more complex understanding of religion, a call, as he noted, that finds resonance in the recent “post-secular turn” in social theory (Asad, 2003; Braidotti, 2008; Habermas, 2006, 2008). The growing critiques of secularism and laicité developed in this body of work respond to recent global developments, in particular the instrumentalization of the banner of secularism (alongside the banners of liberal feminism, sexual rights, and human rights more generally) to justify a global “war on terror”. As many have argued, the War on Terror marshals thinly veiled racist policies directed against Muslim immigrant communities in various countries, particularly in Western Europe, once again raising questions about the universalist pretensions and promises of emancipation of discursive appeals to political liberalism. The sociologist Saadia Toor (2012) has called attention to a “palpable disease with Islam within the liberal mainstream and portions of the Left,” informed by Orientalist and Islamophobic ideologies that stereotype Islam as “uniquely misogynist and homophobic … the result of the essential illiberalism of a religion that has never undergone a ‘Reformation’”. (p. 1) As Vaggione noted, the deployment of secular frames to target Muslim communities “reveals the ethnocentric biases underlying these normative models”. More generally, he suggested that the stalwart defense of secularism or laicité runs the risk of essentializing religion overall as fundamentally backward and something to be overcome on the path to a universal modernity. Recalling the parallel inscription of religion and sexuality in the private sphere by liberal philosophers, Vaggione noted a certain irony in

the fact that “movements, whose central aim was to dismantle the dichotomy between public and private, have in these debates, reinscribed the closet of the private sphere as the proper place of religion”. (Vaggione, 2013, 154)

This critical interrogation of a discourse so central to sexual rights advocates’ response to conservative religious activism elicited quite heated discussion at the Latin American Regional Dialogue. Certainly, there are moments when activists’ arguments reproduce the most problematic aspects of modernist narratives, as when one Brazilian gay activist called on lawmakers to emulate the “civilized countries of the First World” during congressional testimony on a bill recognizing same-sex unions (de la Dehesa, 2010, p. 134). At the same time, one might question whether a critique that developed largely within the US and European academies to challenge US military expansionism and to challenge racist attacks on immigrant communities in Western Europe can be applied in the same way in contexts where the banner of the secular state or of principles of laïcité is primarily deployed to challenge one of the most powerful institutions in national and regional politics. Just as it is not the same for the United States government to deploy the discourse of human rights to justify military invasions as it is for a local organization to use the same discourse to stop a campaign of police abuse.

In his presentation at the Latin American Regional Dialogue, Fernando Seffner of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) raised the need for contextual sensitivity in such critiques. While recognizing that his own naturalized assumptions regarding the defense of secularity and laïcité have changed over the years, Seffner stipulated that this does not mean that his earlier thinking was “wrong” or “a mistake”. Rather, he argued this shift reflected a contextually specific imperative at a given moment in time, precisely to respond to the Church’s central role delimiting the boundaries of public debate. While recognizing that “these are different times”, Seffner nonetheless suggested that there are specific situations when the defense of laïcité has a place in politics, citing the example of Brazilian lawmakers who place their hands on the Bible during legislative
debate, declaring it to be “my constitution and the true constitution of Brazil”. In such moments, Seffner argued, “calling on people not to base their decision on religious values is not a mistake”. Similarly, in his comments on Vaggione’s paper, Luis Antonio Cunha, coordinator of the Observatory on State Laicité at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), drew a useful distinction between the secularization of society and the laicization of the state, suggesting that, while dialogue with religious organizations and people of faith is undoubtedly important, a line should be drawn when it comes to the uses of scripture as the basis of law and public policy; maintaining this line remains crucial in Latin American polities. All of this said, Seffner recognized that such critiques have denaturalized the discourse of secularism in productive ways, shedding light on how projects of secularization (or laicization) come in many forms, all of which — like religions — presuppose a moral vision that we can and must interrogate.

Beyond his normative critiques of the defense of secularism and laicité as deployed by sexual rights activists, Vaggione also raised important arguments concerning other limitations of this political strategy. First, he suggested that this strategy fails to take into account the “strategic secularism” currently embraced by religious activists and authorities. Again, if on the one hand this shift in conservative discourse can be regarded as a success of activists’ defense of secularism in the past, it now presents the need to develop new responses to the shifting discursive terrain of political debate. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, Vaggione situated a critique of this strategy within a broader critique of the state-centered focus of sexual rights movements. For sexual rights to become a reality, he argued, broader and deeper cultural transformations are needed that go beyond formal changes in law and public policy.

Again noting that the defense of secularity or laicité, in some of its deployments, runs the risk of alienating large sectors of the population or labeling people of faith as backward, Vaggione was emphatic that the realization of sexual rights as a daily practice “[requires] a cultural transformation that would permit overcoming notions of guilt and sin with respect to sexuality”. To this end, he
proposed an alternative strategy based on the recognition of and articulation with religious actors who may be supportive of sexual and reproductive rights and even sexual pleasure. This reasoning strongly resonates with the vision developed by Corrêa, Petchesky & Parker (2008) in relation to a politics of the body and its integrity, freedom, social connectedness, and pleasures that may:

...prepare the ground for working coalitions and solidarity across many diverse activist groups — whether feminist, lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, intersex, sex workers, and people living with HIV, or groups mobilized against torture, militarism, racism, and ethnic violence and those for health care, reproductive justice, comprehensive sex education, food security, and disability rights. (Corrêa, Petchesky, & Parker, 2008, p. 233)