

Guest Editorial

Visible/Invisible: Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere

It is by now well understood that the predicted decline of religion in the modern age has not come to pass. While some have spoken of a “return of religion” to the public stage, the argument could be made that religion has not so much returned as become newly visible in particular ways. And yet, the assumption that religion somehow belongs (or *ought to belong*) to the domains of “tradition” and “the pre-modern” remains a highly visible feature of popular as well as academic accounts of the rise of modernity in its varied technological, economic, and cultural dimensions. Stories recounting the decline, disappearance, or sudden return of public religion thus demonstrate how the very notion of the modern public sphere is circumscribed by ideological narratives about the place of religion within modernity—narratives that shape the attitudes, actions, and policies of individual as well as state actors.

The articles brought together in this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* address visible instances of public religion in unique and provocative ways. As such, they testify to the terms on which “religion” has become, and remains, visible on the public stage: from moral panics about religious dress codes (Arêas), to the prominence of religious architecture within the urban landscape (Gonzalez, Karim), to the circulation of journalistic representations of “miraculous” events (Mann), to the techniques and technologies of spectacle-making that are redefining ritual performance in institutional religious settings (Baker), to spaces of Internet-mediated discussion that epitomize a more widespread redrawing of the boundaries between public and private arenas of religious life (Pasche Guignard). With reference to diverse national and transnational contexts—Canada, France, Switzerland, India, “the West,” or, for that matter, the putatively spaceless realm of digital culture—each of the articles presented here offers some new ways of thinking about the visibility of religion in public life.

And yet the enduring story of religion’s decline remains part of the background noise of any examination of public religion. Indeed, what underlies this persistent assumption that religion will become, should become, or already has become invisible in the modern public sphere? One possible genealogy can be traced back to Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), which arguably minimized the role of religion in public life, positing it as a tool of the ruling class and as a remnant of pre-Enlightenment irrationality that would inevitably disappear with the adoption of “communicative rationality”—although, we hasten to add, Habermas himself has more recently acknowledged the limitations of his original account of the fate of religion in modernity (Habermas, 2011). However, at the root of both Habermas’ original

work and in his own addendum, one still finds an enduring attachment to a particular conception of the secular nation-state and its presumed role in fostering the conditions of possibility for a truly universal public sphere. While “religion” may make productive interventions in the public sphere, it can only do so if it adopts a universal language of the secular. Of course, scholars such as Nancy Fraser (1992) have challenged Habermas’ notion of a universal public sphere, and work on counterpublics has likewise proposed that the Habermasian model needs to be replaced by one that makes room for a plurality of public spheres (Warner, 2002). Nonetheless, the status of “the secular” as a constitutional element for the creation and healthy survival of modern public spheres is not easily dismissed. As Craig Calhoun (2011) observes, the “tacit understanding of citizenship in the modern West has been secular” (p. 75), despite the long-standing ways religious actors, institutions, and patterns of adherence have made their presence felt in multiple layers of public discourse.

Building upon a growing body of scholarship that recognizes “the secular” as a series of anthropologically and politically distinct projects, rather than a universal norm of modern political life (Asad, 2003), Calhoun (2011) reminds us that what we call “secular citizenship” in fact refers to a category that can assume multiple forms, according to discrete political histories, including those of “separation of church and state in America, fairness in allocation of public support to different groups in India, *laïcité* and the exclusion of religious expression from even non-political life in France and Turkey” (p. 75). Simply put, there is no teleological, universal norm called “the secular” to which theorists of the public sphere might refer. Instead, the place of religion in public life is always, necessarily, shaped by distinct political projects to define terms of religious visibility, each according to its own way of envisioning citizenship, the role of the state, and the possibilities and perils of cohabitation in a religiously plural world.

In Canada, particularly in the post-9/11 context, there has been much interest in shoring up a particular definition of “secular citizenship” and thereby constraining the place of religion in public life. A prominent recent case in point emerged in 2013, with the tabling of the controversial Bill 60 by the Québec government, which sought to ban public sector workers from wearing conspicuous religious symbols (see Stolow, 2015, in the Commentary section). But secular citizenship can also be witnessed in more subtle evocations of Canadian multiculturalism that encourage the subordination of religious identity to national (and perhaps, by implication, “secular”) identity. A tension exists between the Canadian approach to multiculturalism, where religious expression is protected under the Charter of Human Rights, and the growing sense that religion—particularly the religions of “others,” whose practices and norms do not align with the Christian-dominated Canadian mainstream—poses a threat to the authority of the secular state, if not the very fabric of Canadian society and its “core values.” One can see this tension in discussions about the public outcry over the proposal to accommodate practitioners of shariah law in civil law in Ontario (Razack, 2008), or in debates about the risks posed by Sikh children bearing kirpans (ceremonial daggers) in Canadian schools, or in controversies over whether young Muslim girls should be allowed to wear their hijabs on Canadian soccer fields (Lakhani, 2008).

Although these examples demonstrate a certain degree of consternation about the incursion of religion into public life, they also show how Canadian projects to “protect secularism” unfold within a context where the dominant structures of religious affiliation and attachment can pass unnoticed, or at least largely uncontested. Again, Québec provides a telling example, in which Bill 60 was proposed under the shadow of a large Catholic crucifix hanging over the head of the speaker of the *chambre des communes* of the provincial legislature. On a more banal level, one might consider how little public consternation is ever registered among defenders of secularism with regard to the profusion of Santa Claus images, the singing of Christmas carols, or even the designation of Sunday as a common day of rest; such things are widely understood to not pose a threat to secular public life because they have been recast as elements of Canadian heritage, tradition, and a “shared culture,” despite their undeniably and inextricably religious valence in the eyes of non-Christians (cf. Arêas, 2015, pp. 29–50 and Gonzalez, 2015, pp. 67–85, for discussion of comparable cases in France and Switzerland, respectively).

Projects to construct or defend a secular public sphere thus do not point the way to an evacuation of religion from public life but rather reveal desires to subsume certain features or types of religion within a more comfortable narrative about the modern nation-state as the ultimate political expression of “Western civilization” and its cherished “values,” which are positioned as necessary bulwarks against religiously coded forms of “barbarism.” For example, on November 5, 2014, Canada’s Conservative government tabled a new law entitled the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act*, which seeks to make it illegal to allow members of polygamous or forced marriages to immigrate to Canada and which would function as an amendment to Canada’s existing legal framework, as established by the *Immigration and Refugee and Protection Act*, the *Civil Marriage Act*, and the *Criminal Code*. As detractors have already noted, the proposed law is not only laced with racist discourse but also, more specifically, in its application it would likely function as an institutional barrier discouraging marginalized communities from reporting violence. Ostensibly, the law is meant to signal a strong stance on violence against women by denouncing “any type of violence against women or girls, including spousal abuse, violence in the name of so-called ‘honour’, or other, mostly gender-based violence” (Government of Canada, 2014).

However, the language of barbarism points to a deeper set of concerns about religious difference. In the face of ongoing realities of violence against women in multiple forms, both within and outside Canada’s borders, the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act* seems designed not so much to address existing sources of violence as to assist in the policing of the boundaries of a nation-state that is more comfortable with Judeo-Christian norms governing the institution and practice of marriage. As this legal initiative suggests, religion becomes “visible” when it diverges from the dominant narrative of the nation-state and, conversely, remains “invisible” when it is easily subsumed into that narrative. Although, in a multicultural and religiously plural context such as Canada’s, the notion of a secular public sphere is meant to preserve and protect pluralism, allowing all citizens equal inclusion in public discourse, in effect, such arrangements often end up excluding citizens who wish to “bring religion” into

their understanding of issues of public concern, while at the same time setting the terms on which “religious others” are brought into the public limelight as objects of legal and moral opprobrium.

If the secularization thesis of post-Enlightenment modernity continues to shape the visibility of religion in the public sphere, so too does the fundamental assumption of political secularism: that even if religion has “not yet” fully disappeared, its only legitimate place is that of the private sphere. Although the parochialism of “privatization” as a particularly Western concern has been taken up by numerous scholars of religion (Asad, 2003; Casanova, 1994; Meyer & Moors, 2006), the idea that religion belongs to the private sphere—particularly in the context of Western valorization of the individual subject—contributes to the assumption that, when religion makes itself felt in the public sphere, its incursion is somehow surprising or represents an exception to the norm. As with secularism, privatization is a key trope for the narrative of modern democracy. Religion is seen as an individual right, but one that comes with a particular discursive valence. As Calhoun (2011) explains, “religious freedom could be recognized as a right, but it was implicitly always a right to be wrong or to have a peculiar taste and thus not to have matters of faith arbitrated by the court of public opinion” (p. 79). If, at the risk of simplifying, the goal of the (Habermasian) universal public sphere is to create conditions that will allow individual citizens to come together to make reasoned decisions about issues of shared public concern, then positing religion as inherently unreasonable effectively bars it from that process. In this logic, religion is relegated to its “proper place”—the private sphere—making it incumbent on the hegemonic actors of state and market to police religious discourse and the conduct of religious actors to ensure it remains there.

Of course, as scholars of media have begun to explore, part of the difficulty with contemporary discussions about the public and private spheres lies precisely in the realization that the difference between them has become increasingly difficult to draw. In this vein, several of the articles in this issue draw attention to the problematic distinctions of private and public as manifested in specific instances of visual contest over religion’s “proper” place: expressions of indignation at the wearing of the *niqab* as an affront to definitions of civic intercourse that depend on the accessibility of the human face (Arêas); mass-mediated commentary on the spectre of minarets as an unwelcome colonization of the urban visual field (Gonzalez); the circulation of testimonies on “mommyblogs” that reinsert matters of private concern into larger arenas of public discussion (Pasche Guignard); or the re-negotiation of distinctions between esoteric knowledge (traditionally understood as secret and invisible to all but a select community of initiates) and exoteric discourse by Ismaili Muslims through their uses of print culture, public lectures, and architecture (Karim). These studies build upon what has already grown into a rich body of interdisciplinary scholarship on religion, media, and modernity exploring how the technological arrangements, practices, formats, and genres that make up “media” have been appropriated, re-purposed, and adapted by diverse religious actors, movements, and organizations on both local and global scales (Clark, 2007; de Vries & Weber, 2001; Hoover, 2006; Lövheim & Lynch, 2011; Meyer & Moors, 2006). By calling attention to the ways religious actors, institutions, and com-

munities actually make use of media, this growing scholarship provides an important context for understanding how religion has “become visible” at our current historical juncture, not just through the public representation of religious matters via mass media institutions such as print or television journalism, but also through the ongoing efforts of religious actors themselves.

At the heart of these re-negotiations and contests over the boundaries between public and private is the notion of *visibility*, which we have selected as a key organizing concept for this special issue.¹ One of our motives for doing so is to draw attention to the fact that discussions about religion and its public presence either openly or implicitly depend upon fundamental assumptions about how religious sources of knowledge, practice, and power are materialized in the first place. In many definitions, the term *religion* refers to a realm of activity that deals principally with invisible or immaterial entities and forces (God, heaven, the soul, ethical principles, etc.) that are presumed not to exist “in the real world” and that as such can be safely relegated to the “purely symbolic” register of human affect and belief (cf., in this regard, Mann’s discussion of the representation of miracles, 2015, pp. 87–103). But, as a number of scholars of religion and media have pointed out, such common sense is confounded by even a very cursory survey of the multiple ways religious practices, affiliations, and ways of knowing the world are manifested in concretely material and embodied terms, such as through the training and tuning of the senses in order to “properly receive” spiritual gifts; through the codification of gestures that actors depend upon in ritual performance; or through the deployment of technological and material affordances that govern interactions between religious professionals and lay populations (Meyer, 2010; Meyer & Houtman, 2012; Morgan, 2012; Stolow, 2013; cf. Baker’s discussion of evangelical Christian “technology stewards,” 2015, pp. 51–65).

At least so far as visual culture is concerned, we might well recall here how religious actors have long depended upon diverse material, technical, and bodily means of negotiating between “the visible” and “the invisible” in order to articulate versions of what David Morgan calls “visual piety” (Morgan, 1998; cf. Karim, 2015, pp. 11–28). On the one hand, we can invoke the well-known (if greatly exaggerated) suspicion of “idols” and “graven images” in Jewish, Islamic, and Protestant Christian traditions that continues to inform modern-day anxieties about the power of images to seduce and to deceive, and that legitimize iconoclastic projects to sequester, censor, or destroy images in such diverse contexts as religious ritual, public art, or scientific laboratory life (Ellenbogen & Tugendhaft, 2011; Latour & Weibel, 2002). On the other hand, we might invoke legacies of investment in the proliferation and adoration of images, such as in the rich visual economy of Catholic saint veneration, or in the reverential technique of “seeing” a divine power and thereby receiving its grace that is central to Hindu ritual practice as well as the effusion of Hindu religious iconography in public life, as taken up by Mann’s article in this issue (cf. Jain, 2007; Rajagopal, 2001). These and other examples alert us to the need, not only to document and understand the ways religion has become (newly) visible in public life, but also to identify the specific terms on which that visibility is imagined, negotiated, processed, and circulated by religious actors themselves.

Taken together, the articles collected in this issue thus invite readers to consider what are the broader frameworks of encounter, confrontation, collaboration, and exchange among distinct regimes of visibility. The concept of visibility, we propose, provides a uniquely productive analytical lens through which one can explore the unfolding of diverse projects to demarcate the secular from the religious or to distinguish “polite” forms of liberal religiosity from their “intolerable others.” It also allows one to track some of the inventive ways religious actors pursue their own projects of salvation or purification, or forge their own bonds of affect and common purpose, operating on a terrain that often cuts across, or lies somewhere beneath, the public spheres of nation-states.

Although this is the first issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* to focus on the topic of “religion,” we dare suggest that the associated concerns with visibility and public life should strike familiar notes for our readers. Indeed, students of communication and media have recourse to a long history of scholarship addressing the supremacy of visual perception as a gateway to authentic experience, reliable knowledge, and power (see, for instance, Heidegger, 1977; Jay, 1992; Jay & Ramaswamy, 2014; Levin, 1993; McLuhan, 1964; Mulvey, 1975). More recent work has drawn particular attention to the ways modern forms of political power have been articulated with the rise of new technologies of mediation that extend the terrain of the visible, or that make use of new techniques and strategies for the exercise of what Daniel Dayan (2013) describes as the work of “premonstration” and “remonstration” (see also Brighenti, 2007; Dayan, 2013; Gonzalez, 2015; Thompson, 2005; Virilio, 1994). By bringing such concerns about the “power of vision”—to see and to make things seen—into closer dialogue with questions of religion and the public sphere, we hope to foster new opportunities for interdisciplinary discussion, but also to challenge some of the secularist biases that continue to dominate scholarship produced under the aegis of communication and media studies. The articles gathered here, we propose, offer particular case studies that add local content to a more general understanding of contemporary visual culture. But they also might serve as signposts pointing toward a new way of re-imagining our own field of study: one in which “religion” will be taken more seriously as an indelible (if not always clearly visible) dimension of media and the public sphere, both historically and in our contemporary global moment.

Note

1. Here it is worth pointing out that our emphasis in this special issue on the trope of “visibility” carries the risk of suppressing other, equally rich perceptual registers in and through which religion performs its work in public life. For a corrective to our prejudicial investment in the power of vision, see, *inter alia*, the profusion of excellent recent work on religious soundscapes and their consequences for our understanding of “the public sphere,” such as Hirschkind (2006) and Weiner (2013).

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