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Global Perspectives on Religion, Media and Public Scholarship

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Abstract

This article encourages researchers of religion, media and culture to develop new, global, comparative conversations about the meaning and purpose of public

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scholarship. Key terms like "religion", "media", "publicness" and "scholarship" can be understood and articulated differently in different social, cultural and geographical locations, and dialogue across our academic contexts is needed to help explore these parallels and divergences. This article shares three reflections from scholars who have lived and worked in west Africa, southern Europe and south-east Asia. Each contributor has been asked to address two questions: How do religious communities engage public audiences? And how can (or should) scholars communicate with the public? The conclusion to the article identifies some of the central themes of their responses: secularity, colonial legacies, globalization, power, vulnerability, and the intended audience of our public interventions.

Keywords

globalization – secularity – vulnerability – public scholarship – politics – West Africa – South-East Asia – Catholic Europe

1 Introduction (Tim Hutchings)

This article brings together three short pieces reflecting on the relationship between religion, media and public scholarship in different parts of the world. By sharing our own international conversation, we aim to promote the continued emergence of global, comparative discussion of what it means to be simultaneously a scholar of publicness and a public scholar in the field of Religion, Media and Culture.

Over the last 20 years, religion has returned to public life in at least some parts of the world in a way that challenges traditional theories of secularization (Herbert, 2011). Religion is resurgent in news, politics, public discourse and entertainment media. This context confronts scholars of religion with a compelling need for effective public communication. Religion is at once more important and less understood, subject to coverage by journalists with no specialist training and observed by audiences—and policy makers—who may have no personal religious experience. Digitally networked societies create new and additional challenges, fragmenting audiences while amplifying the scale and speed at which ideas can circulate. The economic reality of media production has changed as well: old paradigms of public scholarship, like the perennial call for scholars to help train journalists in religious literacy, look rather different when journalism itself is marginalized and under threat.

Scholars have long noted that secularization is not a universal and linear phenomenon (Eisenstadt, 2000). Both the disappearance and the reappearance of

religion are taking place in different ways in different social and geographical locations. The role of the public scholar of religion must also therefore be different in different places and contexts. The opportunities, challenges and risks of public communication to an individual scholar or scholarly community arise from the particular conditions of their place and time. Key variables include their level of media access, academic freedom, political oversight, the needs of their audience and the kinds of positive and negative responses they might encounter.

For researchers interested in religion, media and culture, publicness is a challenge with at least two layers. We are called upon (by our institutions, funders, governments and by our own normative commitments) to make our research public. At the same time, the special subject of our research includes religious practitioners and media communicators who are trying to impact publics of their own. In other words, we are simultaneously public scholars and scholars of publicness. We mediate subjects who are already mediating themselves. Our talk about the people and groups we study competes for attention with their own talk about themselves, and indeed their talk about us.

There are other participants in this circle of representations. Many of our research participants and interlocutors are already wearily familiar with the experience of being mediated by others, from filmmakers to journalists to politicians. This history of often hostile and damaging mediation adds additional ethical weight to our own responsibility as public communicators of scholarship.

With these initial thoughts in mind, this article invites experts located in three different continents to consider what public scholarship in religion and media looks like today. Our collaboration began as a roundtable at the biennial conference of the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture in Boulder, Colorado in 2018. In this article, the panel chair (Hutchings) and three of the panel contributors (Asamoah-Gyadu, Evolvi and Han, arranged alphabetically) reflect and expand on some of that roundtable conversation. Dr Tim Hutchings is a scholar of digital Christianity in northern Europe and the United States, and has authored the introduction and conclusion of this article. Revd Professor Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu has written extensively about the materiality, theology and mediation of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in West Africa. Dr Giulia Evolvi studies Catholicism and Islam in southern and central Europe, with particular attention to social media and blogging. Dr Sam Han explores digital culture and religion in East Asia, including studies of Christianity, Islam, new religions and popular religion. Each contributor was asked to consider two questions, reflecting the double situation we have described: How do religious communities engage public audiences? And how can (or should) scholars communicate with the public?

2 An African Viewpoint (J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu)

2.1 *Introduction: Media, Religion and Globalization*

The decline of the public practice and acknowledgment of the force of religion in human life in the modern West has coincided with the ascent of religion in Africa. For the most part, people's point of entry into the religious experience begins with a quest for meaning that is inspired by a life crisis or a general desire for something beyond the natural or ordinary order, that is, something mystical (Wettstein, 2012, p.24). Against the backdrop of an Enlightenment worldview coupled with phenomenal strides in technology, media and development, the supernatural worldview has gradually been edged out of the public sphere in the West. In various ways, however, people still continue to interact with these unseen powers in their private lives and spaces. In contrast, the force of religion as a public institution is still prevalent within African societies. Africans take an ontological approach to reality.

In the globalized world of the twenty-first century, we can neither talk about Africa without religion, nor can we talk about religion without Africa. In other words, the global descent into secularization has to be held in perspective because the non-Western world in general, and Africa in particular, stands as a negative instance of the separation that the West is consciously creating between the sacred and secular realities of human life and development. Media, in all its forms, has become the virtual "midwife" of globalization, and so we do not have to overstretch the imagination to appreciate the intersections that now exist between religion and media in Africa today. Consider for instance a recent study of the African video industry by Birgit Meyer (2015). One of her conclusions is that African movies consciously set out to render spirits visible through a logic of revelation (p.156–157). The movies are recognized by audiences as successful harbingers of truthful insights into dimensions of life and existence not ordinarily available or inaccessible through normal perceptions.

The intersection between religion and media in Africa today includes a number of factors, among which are, firstly, the growing importance of democratic governance in modern Africa. The transitions from the military and civilian dictatorships of the 1980s have given way to democratic governance across the continent and, consequently, "democratization" of the media landscape. A number of repressive and retrogressive censorship regulations relating to media access and use have been abolished. Secondly, this democratization of the media landscape has moved in tandem with the rise of New Religious Movements (NRMs) of all kinds and sorts. NRMs have come out of such major religious traditions as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism and they have acquired an omnipresent status in the media. For example, the African public space is now

dominated by advertisements for various Pentecostal/charismatic churches for whom media constitutes an integral part of religious self-expression. Thirdly, since religion is the most dominant form of cultural expression in the African media today, scholarship in religion and media is no longer an optional discipline. That means, for the humanities and social sciences in particular, it is virtually impossible to study any topic without looking at it through the lenses of religion as mediated within various forms of media outlets.

2.2 *Religion and Public Scholarship*

It goes without saying that scholarship ought to reflect on developments that are important to public life. Media provides important information on what people are about in the world and what they think. At the 2018 ISMRC conference, Anthea Butler delivered a plenary presentation on "Religion and Public Scholarship in an Age of Anger." What Anthea Butler refers to as an "age of anger", I would like to rephrase within the African context as an "age of desperation." It is an age in which increasingly Africans search for answers in religion as a means to human flourishing. To cite the power of contemporary Pentecostal/charismatic religion as an example, we listen to motivational sermons and buy books produced by these charismatic Christian leaders because they promise alternative solutions to failed economic and political systems on the continent. In the midst of corruption, poverty, squalor, and deprivation, the supernatural and what it offers by way of power, strength and hope has become important in the African search for life and hope.

On the radio, television, the internet and on social media platforms, Africa's problems are interrogated in religious terms and solutions are offered through prayer and other sacramental objects that people must own if they need to protect themselves against evil (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). Globalization has led to further brokenness and marginalization, with the result that even the increase in migration is partly sponsored by religious understandings of prosperity. International travel is consistently presented in motivational sermons as a means of individual prosperity by Pentecostal/charismatic pastors. Traditional diviners and medicine men and women of African traditional religions also specialize in complimentary rituals that are meant to facilitate the acquisition of visas for traveling abroad. Once people decide to travel out of Africa in search of greener pastures, they are assured of protection through anointing oils from churches, but also charms and amulets from diviners, all meant to guarantee safety on the rough sea of the Mediterranean and success on arrival. Information on all these are available in the media. It is a time in which the "masses" are desperate for both information and understanding of what the different religious traditions have to say about "human flourishing"

and is in fact the reason why the gospel of prosperity, for example, has become important in Africa today.

2.3 *Conclusion: Intersections of Religion and Media in Africa*

The media in both its electronic and print forms are saturated with issues of religion. What this means is that the distinction between religion in the media and media religion is important here: not only do NRM s in particular, for example, mediate the power of spirits through media, but journalists also take interest in reporting on religion. It is simply the most dominant institution within the public space in Africa. Public office holders also invoke or align with the power of religion in both governance and decision-making and the engagements range gay/lesbian debates; Islam in the public square; the role of traditional priest healers and Christian healing camps in health delivery; etc. The point is that we live in a media age and it is impossible to study African societies without reference to the intersection between media and religion.

In the age of globalization therefore, we cannot to step into the African public space without noticing the overwhelming presence of religion. Public debates on matters of socio-political and economic importance are taking place through the media. That means scholarship must interrogate the issues dispassionately if we are not to miss the connection between "knowledge" and "development". Whether we like it or not, media reshapes what counts as "public life" in Africa today, and the scholarship on religion and media can only be enriched by taking these issues on board.

3 Public Scholarship in the Context of Catholic Europe (Giulia Evolvi)

3.1 *Introduction: Religion in Europe*

Europe has been defined an "exceptional case" (Davie, 2002) because it is supposedly more secular than other parts of the world. Grace Davie explains that this "exceptionalism" often coincides with patterns of religious change that do not occur elsewhere, rather than a progressive disappearance of religion. Indeed, the influence of strong religious institutions persists in Europe at the public level. The Catholic Church is, in many European countries, an important actor in the public sphere of civil society (Casanova, 1996). This public role is often tight to historical bounds between state institutions and Catholicism (Giorgi and Itçaina, 2016) and results in a privileged role of Catholicism in national media representations (Ardizzoni, 2007).

In addition, the Catholic Church becomes more public as it adapts to new media logics, as exemplified by the success of the Pope's Twitter account (Narbona, 2016).

Despite the historical and cultural similarities among Catholic countries in Europe, they present different models of state and church relations (Willaime, 2009). The majority of states are secular, but there is a general perception that Catholicism is compatible with—and even informing—secularism. This suggests that Europeans are not necessarily non-religious, but tend to see their religiosity as entangled with secular values. Therefore, scholars need to explore religion in Catholic Europe by looking also at its manifestations in the public sphere. In the next two sections, I will reflect on how religious communities and scholars of religion can (or should) communicate with public audiences.

3.2 *How Do Religious Communities Engage Public Audiences?*

The decline of certain types of religiosity in Europe coexists with the increasing visibility of some religious-related discourses (Green, 2010). David Herbert (2011) defines religion's tendency to find new public roles in the European public sphere as "religious re-publicization." Example of this re-publicization are the strategies employed by minority religious groups to become more visible in the public sphere.

I explored some of these strategies in relation to three patterns of religious change in Europe (Evolvi, 2018). The first pattern concerns the rapid growth of Islam. Muslim youth born in Europe may be frustrated by media representations of Islam as "other" to European culture or inevitably connected with terrorism. Digital media may offer European Muslims a venue to engage with public audiences (Evolvi, 2017). In the case of young Italian Muslims, a way to interact with society is the storytelling of their everyday experiences to normalize the public presence of Islam (Frisina, 2010).

The second pattern is the increased presence of atheists in the public sphere. This regards people who not only cease to believe in god(s), but also create associations to promote secularist values. In certain European contexts, atheists are often dependent on virtual communities, websites and YouTube for public communication (Taira and Illman, 2012). For instance, social platforms such as Reddit may help atheists to establish conversations about their (non) religious identities and express the self-perception of being a minority (Lundmark and LeDrew, 2019).

The third pattern is the emergence of Catholic groups engaged in social actions, such as the so-called "anti-gender movement." These groups organize public protests against same-sex marriage and to protect traditional

family values (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). They tend to self-identify as minorities because they are not officially part of the Catholic Church and are often more religiously conservative than the majority of the population. Suspicious of mainstream communication channels, these groups often privilege the use of the Internet (Harsin, 2018). For example, the French movement *La Manif Pour Tous* (Demo for Everybody) employs social media to circulate textual and visual emotional narratives to diffuse its ideologies.

These three groups—Muslim, atheist, and Catholic—summarize some facets of religious change in Europe. They do not represent the only contemporary religious trends, but they similarly consider themselves as marginalized in relation to a certain mainstream understanding of European Catholicism. They also contribute to the re-publicization of religion in Europe by employing social media both for discussions among members of a community and engagement with larger publics.

3.3 *How Can (or Should) Scholars Communicate with the Public?*

Muslim, atheist, and Catholic groups that choose to employ the Internet for public engagement often talk about a variety of social and political issues besides religion. The use of various media platforms and the entanglement of religious and non-religious elements offer both opportunities and challenges for scholars who want to study these phenomena. In particular, I would like to offer two remarks for what concerns public scholarship.

The first consideration is about theoretical and methodological approaches. The current proliferation of media technologies results in an increasing mediation (or hypermediation) of cultural and social values (Scolari, 2015; Evolvi, 2018). For example, religious organizations may use social networks to communicate with members, blogs to engage with the general public, and websites to organize activities in physical spaces. This may represent a challenge for scholars who seek to study these media practices. By employing mixed methodologies and directly interacting with their subjects, scholars may gain the advantage of understanding communicative strategies they can use also to share academic results with members of a given community or the general public.

The second consideration is that scholars interested in public scholarship can find ways to engage with the groups they study. This can be challenging, especially when the researcher is not ideologically aligned with the groups. However, scholars can enhance the possibilities of public scholarship by finding research topics that have strong public interest. For example, studying Internet-mediated interreligious dialogue among youth (Bosch, Sanz, and Gauxachs, 2017) allows interacting with various religious communities

and developing educational programs. This can also lead to participatory action research, as in the case of scholars who create websites and video-projects to counteract radicalization among migrant youth (Lohlker, 2019).

In conclusion, religion in Catholic Europe is becoming increasingly visible in unexpected places, and the public participation of some groups tend to be tied to digital media practices. Scholars need to theoretically and methodologically understand the entangled character of contemporary media platforms and, when possible and relevant, establish collaborations with the groups they study.

4 Regulation and the State: Challenges and Opportunities for Public Scholarship on Religion in Asia (Sam Han)

4.1 *Introduction: Challenging Eurocentrism in Public Scholarship*

Public scholarship on religion in Asia faces various challenges and opportunities, some of which are shared by what has generally been understood as "the West," namely North America and Europe, but some of which have structural similarities to what is called "the Rest," in particular Africa and Latin America. The Eurocentric nature of how we understand contemporary geopolitics determines a good deal of how public scholarship on religion is assessed. The driving question of this roundtable is welcome as it foregrounds the importance of context, shining light on the differences between regions of how religion is understood in relation to "publicness," a key concern of recent sociology of religion inaugurated by the work of Jose Casanova, in particular his *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994).

After all, what is considered an opportunity or a challenge is relative. It is based on prior expectations or a standard, whether implicit or not, of what the ideal amount of public scholarship should be. Inevitably, there is something of a "secularist" assumption underlying the matter. Indeed, the idea of a "public" is itself a product of Western modernity. As Habermas, Fraser and others have noted, it is historically situated within Western European contexts. Public is not so much unrepentant openness, as many scholars of religion and secularism have pointed out. Instead, it is a community of members. Members of the public are not simply everyone "out there" but those who adhere to specific criteria for membership.

In other words, it is another means of dictating what is considered to be the "appropriate" place of religion in social life. That is precisely what has been under discussion in debates on secularism that have focused on matters of face-covering and modest dress, which is especially prevalent in parts of

Europe namely France, where beachgoers in "burkinis" have reported being profiled and, in some instances, removed.

4.2 *Religious Dynamics in Asia*

The Asian context—and indeed it is with great trepidation that I even refer to a singular Asian context—is unique not only because religious dynamics in Asia pose internally diverse and divergent religious histories (how could one possibly talk about "Asia" at one go?), but because they also do not necessarily contain the secular, modern default setting that Europe does. This of course has some bearing on the contours of public scholarship on religion in the continent. Their peripheral relationships to the core of Europe in terms of the secular orientation of modernity, along with the fact that their modernization processes are quite different (as the "multiple modernities" discourse has made clear), has implications for understanding the relationship between religiosity and secularity.

More specifically, East Asia, as a region, is marked by a syncretic base. Without the dominance of Christianity, and the history of religious wars in the way that much of Europe was embroiled in, for instance, during the Hundred Years' War, the Protestant/Catholic issue is one that is not precisely mirrored in East Asia. Hence, according to the Pew's Global Religious Diversity project, six of the 12 most religious diverse countries are in the Asia/Pacific region. However, as many Asian societies are responding to histories of direct Western influence and oppression, in the forms of colonialism and the Cold War, the impact of secular church/state relations looms large. This is especially the case as many parts of Asia are undergoing massive modernization projects with global linkages involving trade and labor that impact how religion in public is not only practiced but also, in turn, studied. This is most certainly the case in Singapore, where I taught and lived for six years, which is considered the most religiously diverse country in the world, scoring 9.0 out of a scale of 10 (Pew Research Centre, 2014b).

4.3 *Regulating Religion in Singapore*

As a former British colony, Singapore bears a postcolonial reality especially as it pertains to legal matters. Based on English common law, much of the Singapore penal code directly mirrors colonial-era law. This is especially the case for matters of sexuality. A case in point is the issue of 377A of the Singapore penal code. As in India, also a member of the commonwealth, 377A is part of the code that criminalizes sex between mutually consenting adult men. Again, as in India, this has become a point of contention for LGBTQ activists, who have attempted to mobilize toward its

eradication in Singapore since the 2000s. Of note is the religious response to this activism that started on social media, which I have written about previously (Han, 2018). For the present purposes, it is unnecessary to review those developments here but it suffices to say that the rise of both Christian evangelical and conservative Islamic pushback, especially on social media, has placed the Singapore government in a difficult position.

One of the unique, and most highly publicized, features of Singapore is the high level of regulation in all aspects of life. Prior to recent popular cinematic representations of the wealthy city-state, the predominant impression of Singapore was that of severe penalties for infractions, including illegal public assembly, nudity, spitting and, of course, chewing gum. Part of this also includes how one practices religion. Legislation passed in the 1990s was designed to maintain "religious harmony", but in fact allows for restraining orders to be deployed against figures who may cause "feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups; or promoting a political cause, carrying out subversive activities, or exciting disaffection against the President or the Government under the guise of propagating or practicing a religious belief."

Scholars of Singapore have questioned how the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act squares with a key component of the Constitution of the Singapore, Article 15, which guarantees freedom of religion for citizens. Social or moral issues are not so easily distinguishable from religious matters. This could pose some challenges. For instance, what about the study of religion? Does scholarship on religious life of Singaporeans fall under the Act? There is evidence to suggest that there is not much of an issue. Scholars of religion based in Singapore continue to research and publish on its religious history and current developments. However, survey data is notoriously difficult to obtain. Even a recent report on "Religion in Singapore" (Mathews, Lim and Selvarajan, 2019) published by the Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Policy, which has clear ties to the government, relies on data from the International Social Survey Program Study of Religion.

Of the report's findings, one that was most widely publicized in the country's newspapers and media outlets was also potentially the most controversial: "15% of respondents find Muslims threatening" (Rashith, 2019). Much of the publicization of the report dealt with warding off Islamophobia. The principal author of the report was quoted in Singapore's paper of record as noting that "Islamophobia can lead to varying levels of hatred, which can be explosive." The article goes on to make explicit connections between the amount of Islamophobic material the Christchurch shooter had consumed online and the surprisingly high number of respondents who said they found Muslims to

be threatening. Yet the report and the publicization of it mostly referred back to the importance of the state and its responsibility to maintain the "base of religious harmony" in Singapore.

The role of the state is paramount in many aspects of Singapore life, not just religion, as many scholars have noted. The state sets the tone for cultural values, education and other matters. In this regard, it has been dubbed a "nanny state." One example of a way in which it has acted accordingly is through the regulation of what the Singapore government has dubbed "deliberate online falsehoods," a term it has come up with in order to combat what is more often called "fake news." In April 2019, the Singapore government began deliberating legislation that would allow it to "determine what is factual news and what is not." As the BBC reports, "in extreme cases, it can tell online platforms to remove content it deems false" (Vaswani, 2019). Moreover, "individuals found guilty of knowingly spreading falsehoods that affect the public interest can be fined up to S$100,000 and jailed up to 10 years for the most severe cases" (Tjendro, 2019). For the government, the law is necessary in order to "protect Singaporeans from fake news and educate them about potential damage it can cause—in particular inciting racial and religious disharmony" (Vaswani, 2019).

Some religious groups in Singapore have been supportive of the legislation (Salleh, 2018). The National Council of Churches Singapore (NCCS) and the Singapore Buddhist Federation have welcomed it and showed their support in a committee hearing on the matter. However, there are others who say that the law is too sweeping and vague. One academic has pointed out that various parts of the legislation refer to the "diminishing of public confidence" in a state body. As he rightly points out, what about the reporting, commenting or the study of religious issues? If, as had really happened, a suspected terrorist escapes from prison, is mentioning that on Facebook or Twitter a violation as it casts the prison system in poor light? Or, if a pastor criticizes the growing acceptability and visibility of LGBT persons in Singapore public life on the church's Facebook account, does that also constitute a cause for alarm? Such aspects of the legislation "could potentially make commenting or reporting on matters of public interest problematic" (Vaswani, 2019).

4.4 *Conclusion*

If we were to map these developments on the recent scholarly discussion of secularism, this legislation could arguably be viewed as another instance Enlightenment-oriented *laicite*, forging the divide between public and private, with religion relegated to the latter. While this is partly the case, it is certainly not the entire picture. As already mentioned, in Singapore, the

regulation of religion comes from a more specific—political—motivation. As critical scholars of the city-state have suggested, the ruling People's Action Party, which has been in power since independence, errs on the side of regulation and social control less because of a principled adherence to secularism and more because it preserves the concentration of power. Hence, in its response to the growing visibility of religious organizations and discussions of religion in the public sphere, as well as the greater impact of digital culture, the state has, with much pushback, made it quite difficult to have discussions of religion outside of its strictures. Although the case of Singapore is certainly unique in many ways, the trends there—the state regulation of public religiosity and also of its discussion online—are popping up in other parts of the region, including the Phillipines (Buan, 2019), Malaysia (Sivandam and Tan, 2018) and Indonesia (Lamb, 2019). How this would affect public scholarship of religion remains an open question, especially in universities and institutions that are state-funded.

This brief case study reminds us that what it means to be "a public scholar" of religion and media is unstable and contingent, affected by patterns of religious mediation, media coverage of religion, government oversight of academia and other factors that can vary greatly depending on research topic and geographical location.

5 Conclusion: Themes in Global Public Scholarship (Tim Hutchings)

These three brief comments reveal similarities and divergences in the purpose, conduct and aims of public scholarship on religion. In this conclusion, we identify some of these shared themes to highlight points for future discussion of public scholarship in a global context.

The first shared theme is secularity, addressed in different ways in each of the three contributions. The secularization thesis that dominated studies of religion in Western Europe at the beginning of the 20th century has of course been challenged extensively, and it is now clear that the relationship between modernity, religion and secularity is unfolding in different ways in different places. Levels of religiosity in Europe continue to decline, at least by some measures, but Evolvi's comments show that the continent is also becoming more religiously diverse and more public in its discussion of the place of religions in its future. The situation is quite different in Asamoah-Gyadu's report from west Africa, where 'the force of religion as a public institution is still prevalent.' Han focuses on Singapore, one of the world's most religiously-diverse countries, and

argues that regulation and the concentration of political power are more pressing concerns than a European-style separation of public from private life.

A second theme is the historic and contemporary influence of colonialism and globalization. Han points out that Singapore's legal system, including its attitude to religion, is shaped by its colonial inheritance from Europe. 19th-century Christian British understandings of sexuality, religious freedom and other issues have had long-lasting consequences across former colonies in Asia. Asamoah-Gyadu and Evolvi both draw attention to more recent patterns of global migration, driven by populations made vulnerable in part by globalization and leading to a rapid increase in the religious diversity of Europe.

This brings us to a third shared theme: power and vulnerability. Asamoah-Gyadu describes religion is a dominant form of cultural expression in west Africa, released from state regulation and media censorship and able to provide at least the hope of prosperity and security to populations made vulnerable by poverty. In Evolvi's study of historically-Catholic Central and Southern Europe, on the other hand, religion figures as a source and marker of vulnerability: she reports that Christian, Muslim and atheist groups have all come to identify as minorities who need to compete for public visibility to protect their interests. In Han's description of Singapore, the city-state perceives itself to be vulnerable to those who might threaten harmony by emphasizing religious division, and so the state acts to regulate discussion of religion. Han suggests that this policy might render academic scholars of religion vulnerable to state intervention, although the impact of such possibilities in practice remains unclear.

Our final theme is a shared question, raised in different ways by each contributor: who are public scholars of religion addressing, and why? The three authors suggest different approaches for scholars, who need to engage different audiences to achieve different results. In Han's discussion of Singapore, the most urgent need is for the state itself to be properly informed, so that regulatory policies are founded on reliable understanding of key issues and their implications are properly explored. The freedom of scholars to collect, analyze and share data on religion may be curtailed as regulations continue to adapt to new media and spread to new countries. In contrast, Evolvi calls for scholars to address themselves directly to the minority religious communities they wish to study, using new digital tools and methods to engage religious groups, map their activities and perhaps learn from their success at public communication. The challenge for Asamoah-Gyadu in West Africa is much larger in scale: in such a rich context of religious expression, he argues, no scholar of any aspect of society can understand it fully without accounting for the role of religion.

This short article can of course only reflect the beginnings of this conversation. Nonetheless, we have already seen that what it means to be a public scholar of religion is quite different in each of these global contexts. Each contributor describes a different socio-cultural context, function and trajectory of religious participation, a different relationship between religious groups, academia and the state, and different kinds of vulnerability experienced by different groups to different sources of power. Exploring these differences in our own roles as academic researchers can be a fruitful starting point for larger conversations about religion in global society.

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