

Introduction

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Decades of international media headlines indicate that religion and controversy are rarely perceived as strange bedfellows. In consequence, we are witnessing an increased scholarly interest in the media dynamics of mediatized conflicts about religion. We are also seeing a call for increased public scholarship on these themes. This special issue on religious controversies builds on the excellent scholarly discussions we had at *The Researching Religious Controversies Conference (RRCC)*¹, in Sweden in November 2016. The RRCC was hosted by the collaborative research blog *Religion Going Public*² in cooperation with the *Sigtuna Foundation* and the *Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments Project (CoMRel)*. Featuring an international group of renowned researchers from a wide range of disciplines, the conference was organized to explore the interrelationship between religion and controversies, widely conceived. The RRCC also facilitated discussions about the challenges associated with conducting public scholarship on religious controversies. We are particularly proud of the blogging workshops we offered as part of RRCC, which subsequently led to numerous participants publishing popularized blog posts with *Religion Going Public*. We believe that this process, whereby participants are given the opportunity to develop their contributions over a long period of time and for different formats, allows for a different kind of scholarly interaction than regular journal publishing. Some of the contributors to this volume, were at the RRCC, others were not. We have compiled this special issue on religious controversies, by inviting scholars who study and analyze the complexities of specific

¹ The RRCC was part of the *New Public Outreach Strategies for Research on Religious Controversies Project*, designed and headed by Mona Abdel-Fadil and funded by The Research Council of Norway. This outreach project further developed and built on preexisting collaborations between the scholars who comprise the editorial team of the Religion: Going Public blog.

² The site is available at <http://religiongoingpublic.com/>.

mediatized conflicts about religion, in a range of geographical contexts. The select authors' showcase a spectrum of valuable research perspectives on rather diverse case studies, and help open up conversations about how to make sense of mediatized religious controversies.

In the creation of this special issue, we have been particularly interested in shedding light on how religious controversies are constructed, understood, mediated, debated, and resolved in a variety of social, geographical, and media settings. The volume offers a broad range of articles that develop out of the multidisciplinary field "religion, media and culture". We hope through this special issue to facilitate conversations about religious controversies across disciplines, epistemologies, methodologies, and geographical contexts in order to deepen our understanding of religious controversies. The goal is also to further develop the methodologies and theories of research on religious controversies. In this special issue we discuss questions such as: when does religion become controversial?; Is it always religion per se that it is at the heart of the controversy?; What makes religion or something associated with religion - controversial? In this introduction, we provide a brief backdrop to the overarching theme of religious controversies, and identify some cross-cutting issues that have arisen across the different contributions. We identify some general patterns among the controversies dealt with in this special issue, and ask how these patterns may inspire new research efforts. First, however, let's take a moment to discuss the constitutive terms in the phrase "religious controversies", which is in itself contentious and ambiguous.

"It's religion, stupid"

The phrase "religious controversies" is blunt and evocative, and immediately brings up associations to angry mobs, flag burning and at times, inexplicable rage at seemingly mundane matters. The capacity of religion, whether in its doctrinal, social or institutional form, to generate, propagate and exacerbate controversy appears endless. While this capacity may not be unique to religion, nor recent in origin, the last couple of decades have seen what would appear to be unprecedented levels of religious controversies around the world, from the heady mixture of ethnic and religious conflict in the Balkans of the 1990s via the so-called Global War on Terror following the terrorist attacks on the US in 2001 and to the chain of events unfolding in the wake of the "Arab Spring" in 2011. Across these multidimensional, complex and long-range events, a multitude of controversies with constantly shifting references to religion have dominated the world stage, prompting ever larger scholarly and political communities to "get" religion, to "take religion seriously", and to fashion appropriate responses to an unfamiliar concept.

Two aspects in particular appear to stand out in these controversies and the efforts mustered in order to understand them: First, religious controversies of our age tend to be transnational in character, as communities held together by shared faith respond instantaneously to controversies taking place in distant lands. Second, and inextricably linked to the former, controversies, like religions, are currently spread through the media, whether in print, through television news broadcasts, in the radio or in the ever-growing range of social media online. These intertwined processes have led to increased recognition of religion as not simply something that “went away” with secularization and is now “returning” or “resurgent”, but as an inherently transnational and increasingly deculturalized and deterritorialized phenomenon, as indicated by Olivier Roy (2010) in his assessment of the way Islam is changing and transforming in Europe.³

Bereft of cultural specificities or national grievances, the distilled and boiled-down version of “religion” that comes across in most major media outlets, not to mention social media campaigns, readily lends itself to a binary differentiation between “good” and “bad” forms of religion, depending on their assumed compatibility with modern liberalism. Understood from this vantage point, religionists simply cannot help themselves from responding to controversial events in their surroundings, whether they act in the common interest or against it. This construction of religion “generates impressive amounts of work for governments, think tanks, foundations, foreign policy pundits, and religion experts”, as observed by Elizabeth S. Hurd (2012: 952).

The texts assembled in this special issue of *Religion, Media and Digital Culture* take a different approach. Rather than postulating that religion, religions or the religious have sets of fixed characteristics that can either propagate or stifle controversies, the participants in this volume approach religion with a keen attention to the shifting and dynamic capability of religion, religions and the religious to play different roles and take on different guises in different socio-cultural situations and media settings. Importantly, this approach has not been dictated, enforced or even encouraged by the editors to this volume, but originates in the sheer variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives adopted by the contributors.

What is in a controversy?

What makes a controversy a controversy? At a very basic level something is at stake, and there are opposing parties struggling for a win (Cottle 2006). According to Cottle (*ibid.*) all conflicts entail “...a struggle over interests and outlooks, ride on disputes and contestations

³ This perspective has been developed by Roy over a series of publications over the course of the last decade, but finds its fullest realization in *Holy Ignorance* (2010).

of opinions, and may range from “objectively real” to the “subjectively perceived”. While some conflicts fizzle out, others are constantly (re)ignited, and can live on for decades or even centuries. For instance, the Danish cartoons controversy was predominantly framed in Danish media as “that of a ‘culture war’ – a battle between Denmark’s Christian heritage and a confrontation with Islam”, thus amplifying and Samuel Huntingdon’s “clash of civilizations” thesis (Clark & Gillespie 2018), not to mention, the reactivating of old orientalist tropes (Said 1978), fuelling a controversy that does not seem to die out.

A controversy tends to latch onto a range of underlying or interlinked conflicts. For instance, disputes over halal food in Europe, are not just about how to slaughter meat and/or animal welfare, but also relate to wider debates about Muslim minority rights, religion in public space, and ultimately immigration. Similarly, debate over male circumcision is not just about how it is framed as clean or healthier, but also pertains to religious majority-minority rights and the status of religion in a society in general – but it is invariably also linked to other validations. For instance, circumcision of Jewish and Muslim men may be a practically identical medical procedure – but might ignite different feelings and hence arguments either for or against the procedure or state sponsorship of the procedure. In contrast, female circumcision is far more contested due to the procedure being far more invasive of women’s sexuality – and in its most extreme practice it is intended to hamper women’s sexual desire. The procedure is also far more dangerous and detrimental to women’s health, and hence more controversial than male circumcision. When popular and public debates about such issues arise, they are rarely discussed in isolation, but instead weave themselves into interlinked topics of contention or agreement.

We use the term ‘religious controversies’ to encompass all controversies in which the identification and management of religion is implicated, and conflicts attributed to religion as either the main or one of many factors. By this definition the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster causes religious controversy irrespective of whether or not one defines the movement as a “real” religion or not. A religious symbol like the cross can be a source of comfort or controversy and in turn may trigger diametrically different emotions such as rage, calmness, love, hostility, aggression, or indifference, based on the personal worldview and ideological outlook of the person promoting the view and/or the reactions which one may hope to induce in others (Abdel-Fadil, this volume). Still, in everyday conversations, religion is often spoken of as if it is an actor with agency that can either *do* good or bad. In a blog post following the RRCC, Titus Hjelm (2016) writes:

Indeed, it would seem that we see religion mostly through the lens of controversy. If that is the case, perhaps there is something in religion that is intrinsically controversial?

There isn't.

While we too, would argue that religion is not *a priori* or inherently controversial, there are certain contexts in which religion or a specific religion are deemed controversial from the very outset. For instance, in Eurabia or Hindu Nationalist circles, Islam is bad (or controversial) *per se*, much like “religion” may be perceived as a provocation among the transnational movement of dogmatic atheists. Yet, in many other contexts, religion may *become* controversial when it is attributed to certain social conflicts or political turmoil.

A series of global media events demonstrate how religion has been cast as playing a major role, ranging from terrorist attacks to suicide pacts. Yet, as many research studies demonstrate there may be a severe imbalance as to *which* religions are framed as controversial or potentially violent. For instance, the self-professed Christian motivations of Anders Behring Breivik, who carried out the terrorist attacks in Oslo in 2011, were often downplayed in media reports, as are Buddhist monks' entanglement in violent warfare (Frydenlund 2018). In media coverage (and in research) there is a danger of over-focusing on Islam as a “religion of controversy”. As pointed out by Hjarvard & Lundby 2018, media may at times have several roles rolled into one, and may simultaneously both report and be an actor in the conflict, of which the terrorist attacks on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 are perhaps the most obvious example.

In our view, it is precisely the fact that religious controversies engage wider publics and entail what Cottle (2006) calls “struggles over meanings” that makes them worthwhile studying in greater detail. In this sense, religious controversies are “not only about what religion is and does but also how it is talked about” (Hjelm 2016). We would add that it is also about the multitude of ways in which political ideologies, cultural understandings, and religious views may be deeply entangled in what is labeled as “religion” or a “religious controversy”, that is to say, controversies where religion may be implicated as a culprit, but where the back story tends to be a bit more complex. The collection of articles in this special issue, delve into the dynamics of a wide range of complex religious controversies and offer important insights on how such controversies are constructed and played out in various geographical and media contexts.

Religious Controversies: Settings, contexts, patterns

All of the articles gathered in this volume attest to the many slippages and transformations that take place at the intersections between “religion”, “controversy” and “media”, broadly conceived. While these intersections have never been easy or clear-cut, Stewart Hoover's essay succinctly points to the distinctiveness of the “digital age” as a particularly challenging setting for this intersection, in which the circulation of knowledge has

become “conditioned by algorithms” while also enabling “constructive practices rooted in the reflexivities that define the late modern ‘self’”. Indeed, the advent of new, digital and social media and their impact on the formation and trajectory of controversies features across all the contributions, and appears to provide the constitution of selves/others and centers/peripheries according to entirely different conceptual maps than those of more conventionally differentiated subsystems. Some of the contributions to this issue that deal with social and mass media, have been written while the events under scrutiny were unfolding, and in several cases, intensifying.

The departure from the earlier pre-dominance of such subsystems in the conception of “religion” and its surroundings in a late modern media environment is particularly explicit in Henrik Reintoft Christensen’s examination of the “nontroversies” of spirituality in Denmark. Assessing the public and mediated perception of incidents involving advertisements for mindfulness and a seemingly controversial session featuring a lecture on animal clairvoyance in a rural Danish church, Christensen shows how the hybridity of spirituality allows it to slip through the cracks: being not quite secular, nor quite religion. Spirituality in the Nordic region simply fails to arouse the same level of antagonism as “proper” religion, hence the neologism of the “nontroversy”.

In the contributions written by Moumita Sen and Alexander Bielicki, on the other hand, religious controversies taking place in the radically different socio-political cultural contexts of India and Slovakia, yet display surprisingly similar structural contestations between powerful elites and more marginalized peripheries. From the spontaneous eruption of the Indian Mahishahur movement, spawned on social media as a response to a religio-political ritual, to the tightly controlled management and mediatization of the national pilgrimage to the national basilica in Slovakia, both cases exemplify the ways in which controversies tend to erupt as a result of a struggle over definitional authority over key religious figures and practices.

To the diverse participants in the Mahishahur movement, the popular framing of Mahishahur, the main foe of the goddess Durga, as a “demon” is an instrument of political oppression utilized by powerful Indian elites. Through an innovative combination of “deep hanging out” on WhatsApp groups, interviews and observations, Sen shows how the controversy surrounding the “proper” portrayal of Mahishahur was “entirely mediatized in nature”, and provided previously unthinkable links between marginalized rural populations and student activists attempting to rectify the narrative concerning the controversial figure of Mahishahur.

In the case of the national pilgrimage to Šaštín, on the other hand, the control of the media narrative is, at least seemingly, firmly in the hands of a national, ecclesiastical elite. Upon closer inspection, however, Bielicki directs our attention to the interaction between the “hot nationalism” embedded in the formal sermons building up to the event itself and the

varieties of “lived” or “banal” nationalism among participating pilgrims, who play out their allegiances in ways that enable, while not conforming, to the elite discourse. Much in the same way as the Mahishahur movement, then, the national pilgrimage to Šaštin is perhaps best viewed through the lens of continued, reflexive interaction between participants that play active roles in defining the legitimacy of key religious events.

The contributions written by Johanna Sumiala/Anu Harju and Lynn S. Clark/Angel Hinzo, examine how religious controversies are constructed, framed, contested and played out in social media. Although the controversies in question could hardly be more different – a knife attack in Finland and the movement to prevent an oil pipeline extending across Indigenous land in the US – the contextual constraints that provide the backdrop of each of these controversies are easily conflated in the compressed universe of social media, where the Twitter hashtags #TurkuAttacks and #NoDAPL served to crystallize contestations over how to properly frame the events in question. Where Sumiala/Harju find scapegoating, essentialization and racialization of Islam in the framing of the knife attack in Finland, Clark/Hinzo identify reformulations of the sacred, resistance against oil exploitation and a reinvigoration of Indigenous epistemologies in the struggle to prevent pipeline development.

Common to both cases is the persistent *mediatization* of controversies involving religion, in which changes in mediated communication and social life interrelate across media platforms, messages and everyday communication, affecting our collective constructions of reality.

Finally, Mona Abdel-Fadil examines the role of affect in mediatized conflicts about religion and demonstrates how we ‘feel our way’ into political and religious controversies. She uses her online ethnography of a Norwegian pro-Christian Facebook group, which attracts quite the spectrum of people keen to debate religion, culture, and identity from their own vantage point, be it, atheist, religious, or nationalist, as a springboard to discuss the ‘politics of affect’. Abdel-Fadil draws our attention to how affect is performed *for* imagined audiences, and how some ideological positions may go hand in hand with the display of a particular feeling or emotional intensity, which in turn may trigger others into heightened emotional display. Abdel-Fadil demonstrates how affective encounters in social media can thrust a conflict into a particular direction, and intensify and prolong religious controversies in highly specific ways.

This special issue is brought together at a particular time of history, a time when right wing populism is sweeping over many corners of the world, and is frequently connected to religious controversy. This political moment may also entail the mainstreaming of extreme points of views on religious and cultural diversity. Nationalism, religion, and populism are entangled in many of the case studies showcasing religious controversies, in this special issue. Birgit Meyer (2018) suggests we need to shift focus from “mediatization” of religion towards the “media dynamics” of religious diversity. Meyer also points to how some religions are treated according to normative views on religion that may be a poor match to other religions,

worldviews, or cultural practices. Several of the contributors to this special volume, illustrate Meyer's point by providing their insightful analysis on the hierarchical or binary (good vs. bad) understandings of religions or religious interpretations that come to shape the controversies. Across several of the articles, we see how nationalist othering rhetoric may be deeply enmeshed in the way that religious controversies play out in various media, and in certain instances, flirtation with right wing populist ideas may be the main drive of religious conflict. All of the contributions provide important and timely insights into the mediatized dynamics and the entangled ideological pushes for and against intensified religious controversy.

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