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Editorial: Religion in the public square. revisiting 9/11

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Abstract Studies on 9/11 could fill a library. In this short introduction, the editor explains the reason for overcoming the hesitation to add more studies to this library by contextualizing and charting the key concerns and the key concepts of the following contributions. These contributions suggest that 9/11 is not necessarily the watershed between a pre- and a post-9/11 order that politicians and pundits continue to write about. Instead, the attacks have served as a catalyst for trends and trajectories in the global governance of religion that continue to have a significant impact today. Returning to 9/11, then, the contributions take stock of these trends and trajectories in order to chart new ways of engaging with religion in the public square.

Keywords 9/11 · Religion · Religion and politics · Public theology · Political theology

A search for “9/11” in a well-sorted academic library returns more than one million hits, with religion as a core category that cuts across almost all of them. In their accounts of the world after the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 in which thousands were killed, scholars have pointed to the significance of religion for both national and international politics. The “return,” the “revival,” and the “resurgence” of religion had been announced prior to the attacks (*inter alia*, Sahliyah 1990; Casanova 1994; Berger 1999). Some even saw the “revanche of God” (Kepele 1991). During the Global War on Terror—in which both Bush and Bin Laden referred to “their” religions, with Bush accidentally calling for a “crusade” (Lincoln 2006; Kippenberg 2008)—these announcements gained significant traction inside and outside the academy, on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Given that studies of 9/11 could fill a library, I hesitate to add a special section to the long literature list. In this short introduction, I would like to explain the reason for overcoming this hesitation by contextualizing and charting the key concerns and the key concepts of the following five contributions. A symposium at the University of Edinburgh's School of Divinity, sponsored by the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, sparked the idea for collecting the contributions in a special section. The conversations at this symposium suggested that 9/11 is not necessarily the "watershed" between a pre- and a post-9/11 order that politicians and pundits continue to write about (Dudziak 2003). Instead, the attacks have served as a catalyst for trends and trajectories in the global governance of religion that have a significant impact today. Returning to 9/11, then, the contributions to this special section take stock of these trends and trajectories in order to chart new ways of engaging with religion in the public square.

1 Context

The Global War on Terror was declared in the aftermath of 9/11. The costs and the consequences of this war are unclear. There are only estimates of how many lives were lost, especially if both direct and indirect deaths are considered.¹ About one million people were killed in combat (Crawford and Lutz 2019). Estimates suggest that up to 40 million people have been displaced by the war (Vine et al. 2020). Most of these war refugees have been accommodated in developing countries rather than developed countries, often in the Middle East. The war has been accompanied by human rights violations, including torture, across the globe. In European and American contexts, civil liberties were curtailed (Graves 2019). Crucially, democracy has not been built in the countries for which the U.S.-led alliance had planned "nation building" (Niland 2011, 2014; Cammett 2013). On the contrary, it is likely that the war has boosted terrorism. "The presence of U.S. troops in the country," Jessica Stern and Megan K. McBride explain about Iraq, "served as a powerful recruiting tool. Numerous jihadi leaders around the globe described the U.S. occupation as a boon for their efforts. An Al Qaeda strategist ... claimed that the war in Iraq almost single-handedly rescued the jihadi movement. ... It is the spread of this jihadi movement that continues to haunt us, to this day" (Stern and McBride 2013, p. 1).

Since its very declaration, religion has played a role in the Global War on Terror. However, religion is *not* religion. The securitization of Islam that Jocelyne Cesari has sketched in a variety of studies started before the attacks (Cesari 2004, 2010, 2013). Yet 9/11 has strengthened a securitization strategy that "involves political actors who apprehend Islam as an existential threat to European and American political and secular order and thereby argue for extraordinary measures to contain it. ... In this regard, Islamic extremism, especially since 9/11 ..., has become a key security issue across the Atlantic" (Cesari 2013, p. 83). In Europe, the regulation of religion that comes with the securitization of Islam has also had a significant im-

¹ In my overview, I draw on the findings of the Costs of War project. For information on the project, including open-access publications, see <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>.

pact on immigration and integration policies that continue to stir up controversies. According to Rita Chin, “the political retrenchment after 9/11 was merely the final stage of a much longer cycle that began at the very dawn of the European Union” (Chin 2017, p. 140). “Precisely because Islam was understood as antithetical to European freedoms,” Chin argues, “critics from across the political spectrum focused on Muslims as the crucial litmus test for the viability of multiculturalism” (Chin 2017, p. 7). 9/11 confirmed the outcome of this litmus test, crystallizing “a conclusion that is now understood as simple common sense: the oft-stated pronouncement that European multiculturalism has ‘failed’” (Chin 2017, p. 7).

Bin Laden was killed by U.S. soldiers in the operation “Neptune’s Spear” about ten years after 9/11, but the Global War on Terror continues. Under President Barack Obama it was renamed “overseas contingency operation.” Obama expanded the combat into Pakistan (Usmani and Bashir 2014). It has been expanding since, although international troops pulled out of Afghanistan. Currently, the U.S. government is conducting counterterror activities across the globe (Savell 2021). The contributions to this special section, then, are situated in a context that is characterized by the ongoing War on Terror.

2 Contributions

Farid Hafez’ article opens this special section. Hafez charts the entanglement of religion with politics and politics with religion during the War on Terror. He captures convergences in the conceptualization of Islam in politics, on the one hand, and the study of politics, on the other, clarifying how Samuel Huntington’s construct of the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993, 1996) was picked up in the White House, from where it continues to configure U.S. politics. In this politics, Islam has been characterized as a political ideology “with an agency of its own.” This characterization, Hafez argues, allowed for a global system of governance in which the “religionization of the world” led to its depoliticization and the “depoliticization of the world” led to its religionization. In order to escape this system, Hafez advocates for philosophies that draw on Islamic political thought and theology to shake up the political status quo.

Hannah Strømme explores the lives and afterlives of the construct of the clash of civilizations by examining the far-right organization Britain First in the U.K., emphasizing how Huntington’s clash has travelled across contexts and continents. In Europe, Strømme suggests, references to religion have replaced references to race in the xenophobic discourse of the far right. Her analysis of Britain First’s social media strategy shows the significance of scripture for this replacement. Britain First’s representation of the Bible as a benign and banal marker of the identity of Europe relies on Huntington’s construct of the clash. As a consequence, Islam is targeted even when it is not named explicitly. According to Strømme, biblical scholars can make a significant contribution to the study of religion by exposing and explaining how the Bible is wielded as a weapon in the clash that the far right simultaneously perceives and produces.

Building on the critique of the characterization of Islam in these two contributions, I analyze and assess William Cavanaugh's characterization of "the myth of religious violence" (Cavanaugh 2009)—a characterization which has had a huge impact among scholars of religion. I argue that Cavanaugh's myth is, essentially, apologetics. Cavanaugh's apologetics for the church camouflages the contribution of Christianity to the targeting of Islam during the War on Terror. If it has been about a myth at all, the War has been about the myth of Muslim violence. Hence, I call for a conception and critique of "religion" that can account for the significance of Christianity for the differential treatment of religions in public and political discourse.

In turn, Jayne Svenungsson traces the role of Christianity for the conceptualization of "secularity" that singled out Islam. She argues that the differentiation of "the religious" from "the non-religious" that is at the core of the concept of secularity relies on a discourse that can be traced back to a supersessionism at the very origins of Christianity. Svenungsson shows how the binaries through which supersessionism works are activated in debates about diversity today, stipulating which religions are and which religions are not afforded visibility in the public square. Svenungsson concludes that this discourse about diversity is a challenge for scholars of religion. For her, theologians in particular have a responsibility to expose the historical and hermeneutical complexities of Christianity in view of their operations in the public square today.

Atalia Omer shows the effects that scholarship on "religion" has on the ground. Drawing on fieldwork at multiple sites across the globe, she points out how practices that stress tolerance between religions through conversation and cooperation can camouflage the causes of the conflicts that such tolerance is called to counter, thus reproducing colonial and neocolonial necropolitics. For Omer, such practices promote a lack of religious literacy that props up authorities without democratic accountability. Omer argues for the analytical and activist significance of prioritizing the margins in order to counter what she calls the "harmony business"—the business of promoting "positive" as opposed to "negative" forms of religion, which offer no challenge to the political status quo.

3 Consequences

The reasons for overcoming the hesitation to add to the long list of literature on 9/11 are reflected in my short summary of the contributions to this special section. Taken together, these contributions combine retrospective and prospective accounts of the global governance of religion after the attacks in order to chart new avenues for scholarship in the on-going War on Terror.

First and foremost, the contributions show the continuities rather than the discontinuities between the pre- and the post-9/11 order. As mentioned above, 9/11 is not necessarily the watershed between these orders that it was assumed to be. Yet in the aftermath of the attacks, assumptions about the role of religion in national and international politics have travelled from the field into scholarship and from scholarship into the field, thus creating a sealed system in which scholars and stakeholders mir-

ror each other. Cracking such a system requires scholars to pay careful and critical attention to the historical and hermeneutical complexities of how practices that are inspired by religious or non-religious commitments play out in the public square.

The contributions to this special section also show the consequences of characterizing the War on Terror as either a religious or a non-religious war. Of course, genealogies of religion have clarified that the categorization of the religious and the non-religious comes with its own politics (*inter alia*, Cantwell Smith 1963; Asad 1993, 2003; Fitzgerald 2000; Dubuisson 2003; Masuzawa 2005; Nongbri 2013; Barton and Boyarin 2016).² The contributions to this special section zoom into specific cases and specific contexts to chart the fallout of this politics. This politics stabilizes a settlement in which some practices are considered acceptable, while some practices are considered unacceptable to a (post)secular public, a settlement that has the history and heritage of Christianity at its center. Genealogical critiques, then, are not the end of scholarship on “religion” in the public square. Instead, they emerge as a point of departure.

Finally, the fact that religion and non-religion cannot be separated in any strict or straightforward sense does not mean there is no need to think about the orientations that people gain from their religious and non-religious commitments. On the contrary, it is crucial to show how religion is embedded and embodied, thus opening up the discourse about pluralism for the recognition of the lived particularities with which it always already comes in practice. The contributions to this special section accentuate historical and hermeneutical awareness to shake up categories that reify “religion” in the study of “politics” or “politics” in the study of religion.

Altogether, then, what runs through this special section is a subtle but significant call to engage with the sometimes hidden and sometimes not-so-hidden normativities that play out in both political practice and scholarship on political practices. Such engagement is not meant to theologize scholarship on religion, playing into a disciplinary divide that pits prescriptive theologies against religious studies and descriptive religious studies against theologies.³ On the contrary, such engagement is meant to remind scholars of their responsibilities for the public square they study. 9/11 can also be a catalyst for that.

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² Svenungsson (2020) offers a comprehensive overview in view of the role of religion in social and political life.

³ Lewis (2012) offers a critical account of normativity in the study of religion. The question is not whether but which normativities scholars of religion ought to engage.

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