

## **Mediations of Religion and Politics as “Affective Infrastructures”: A Cross-Disciplinary Reflection on Contemporary Politics**

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This article explores the emergent politics of the 21st century through an analysis of the interactions of media and religion in these relations. It argues that to fully understand the dynamics underlying the new forms of populism emerging across the globe, it is necessary to account for them as movements of religious nationalism encompassing race, gender, and nostalgia, made possible by modern media imaginaries. The article argues that disciplined and substantive work on religion remains a lacuna within media and cultural studies, and that its explorations provide an example of how such work could address this critical gap. It concludes by suggesting a specific theoretical approach rooted in its consideration of relations of religion and media: that we think of media texts that circulate in these discourses of religious nationalism as “affective infrastructures” that do important work in making unstable and contradictory imaginaries possible and weaponizing them to political purpose.

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The results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election created a new context and a new set of challenges for cultural scholarship. While a definitive change for American politics (though not as thorough as was expected), the outcome left important questions unresolved. Among these is the nature of the emergent “neo-populism” that has made Trumpism in the United States and broader right-wing ethnonationalism in Europe, Brazil, India, and elsewhere possible. Much has already been said about the turmoil that has erupted in politics in the North Atlantic West and beyond. But there is a broader trend, with resurgent identity movements playing a role in political change across the globe, from Manila to Delhi to Brasilia. These movements seemingly interconnect a wave of global sentiment that combines nostalgia, grievance, gender traditionalism, and antielite agonism that is also expressed elsewhere, including Russia and Turkey.

This article addresses a dimension of these movements that is expressed in different registers and on different levels across this landscape: the way that mediated imaginaries of religious nationalism articulate with these trends. The media provide powerful affective contexts for the deployment of idealized senses of value, virtue, and purpose, and are, of course, central to political discourse today. At the same time, religion—in various guises and put to various purposes—is emerging as an important—even definitive—factor in these assemblages of political purpose and action. This is most obvious in the United States, but can increasingly be seen in other national contexts and, significantly, across and between contexts.

I want to argue that to understand these forces, it is necessary to interrogate relations between religion and media in a disciplined and substantive way. Such an exploration must necessarily understand

these two domains on their own terms. I will begin with some key features of the evolving contemporary political landscape that point to the necessity of an exploration framed in this way. Many of the things we have seen make sense in new ways as we understand how they arise from, or are rooted in, interactions between religion and media. At the same time, gaps and fissures appear in our theory building about what this all means.

I will conclude by proposing a particular way of addressing one such gap in knowledge. We need a deeper and more complex understanding of how media forms materially invigorate one of the primary political drivers of the times: the growing and evolving religious nationalism that is obvious across national contexts. I will suggest that we think of these material mediatic forms as “affective infrastructures,” or “infrastructures of affect” that act to cultivate and instantiate networks and movements of sentiment around issues of gender, race, and a weaponized nostalgia for an idealized, perfected, past. I will further argue that to fully understand these forms, we need to understand how they are deeply embedded in the specifically mediatic histories of religion in modernity.

It is well-known that the field of media studies has lacked a strong and substantive discourse of “the religious,” in spite of the central role played by religion in politics and society both historically and contemporaneously (Hoover, 2017). The emerging situation, where religion and media are brought into common purpose in support of the “new politics” of figures as disparate as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro, calls for a substantive analysis that centers media and mediation in these processes. These various movements share what Arlie Hochschild has called a “deep story,” described recently by Roberts and Wahl-Jorgenson (2020):

Arlie Hochschild has argued that Trump supporters’ political beliefs are shaped by an underlying “deep story” which is premised primarily on emotions rather than facts, and pits cosmopolitan, multicultural, and privileged elites against the “ordinary people” struggling to get by in an increasingly hostile culture. The strategies identified here construct a distinctive epistemological universe which underpins this deep story, completed with the vital narrative ingredients of victories, victims, and villains. (p. 183)

Religion has long been articulated into the “deep stories” that underly conservative politics (for a definitive history in the United States see Bennett, 1995). Today’s emergent “new populism” invokes religion in new ways, linking it to themes of racialized nationalism framed by struggles over gender and idealized domestic settlement (Wilkerson, 2020). Such “deep stories” should be almost by definition an object of analysis by culturalist media scholarship. Imaginative narratives are at the very center of media texts, and interpretation and knowledge building about them are at the very center of the work of media scholars. This means that the gap in media scholarship around religion leaves the field ill prepared to address the challenges of this new politics.

### **Two Central Cases**

So let us turn to an exploration of this evolving landscape. I begin with the specific cases of the United States and Russia, where the contradictions and ambiguities of the leadership of Donald Trump and

Vladimir Putin have been accompanied by direct and unambiguous appeals to—and support by—religious leaders and movements. In the case of Trump, he enjoyed high-profile (and at the same time confusing and controversial) support from evangelicals. Putin has made common purpose with the Orthodox Church and its leaders around a project of recovering a role for Russia as a foundation and source of traditional (racialized) Christian values. In each case, these were no mean accomplishments. Trump was hardly an embodiment of Christian ideals. Likewise, Putin is far from devout in his personal life, and the Russian church itself is still emerging from an era when it was not at the center of Russian (and before that, Soviet) life. From Russian Orthodox and American evangelical perspectives, they share a common purpose in recentring religion in a prominent place in their respective national cultures (and as we shall see, they communicate and network with one another). And each feels it found a champion in its respective head of state.

But these are deeply troubled, ambiguous, and even contradictory relations, and depend to a great extent on efforts of imagination. I mean to invoke here the sense of that term meant by Benedict Anderson (1991) and his definitive work on the role of imagination in creating and sustaining senses of—and valences of—identity and nationalism. Most pertinent here are the implications from Anderson that imaginaries are socially diffuse, are grounded outside the realm of material interests, and are deeply, and at the same time uniquely, powerful and convincing. There is an evolving scholarly discourse that sees this social imaginative action as a material practice, that we can think in terms of the powerful role that systematic imaginaries can play in social and cultural formation (Alma & Vanheeswijck, 2018; Sumiala, 2013; Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014). Imaginaries should be a particular object of culturalist media analysis as media possess unique affordances for the formation and circulation of imaginative resources. Media markets and media commodities are fundamentally about this, and media affordances operate at levels and in registers that are at the same time linked to—and operate in dynamic tension with—structural and material geographies and realities (Couldry, 2012). In fact, one way to describe the scholarly project of cultural studies is as an inquiry into the “cultural work” necessary to articulate media with actually existing conditions on the ground (Hall, Morley, & Chen, 1996).

Part of my project here, then, is to help address the lacuna of religion within media studies by focusing on a set of relations where substantive media-analytical effort is called for. We cannot understand the emergent politics of the post-2016 North Atlantic West without understanding the ways that religion is articulated into them and we cannot understand how that articulation works without understanding the circulation of media imaginaries.

The relationship between Donald Trump and some leading figures in the American evangelical movement raised many questions. In the first instance, the question was how someone who in his personal life was so far from the abstemious, disciplined, “Godly” model one assumes would be prized in that community and who is an infrequent church attender at best could be identified by so many evangelicals as “their” president. There is, of course, a certain mercenary pragmatism in their support, as many of Trump’s policies, not least his record in conservative judicial appointments, his responsiveness to the “right to life” position on reproductive rights, and his espousal of the so-called religious freedom cause domestically and internationally, were things they liked. But their support went well beyond that. Trump was (and continues to be) seen by many in almost messianic terms, as we will see, and this is hard for many outside the movement to fathom.

But there is an equally ambiguous (or perhaps even contradictory) political formation in the relationship between Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church. Over the past few years, Putin has begun to represent himself and Russia as important bulwarks of the Christian world, and has at the same time undertaken domestic policies specifically in support of the Church's interests. Russia is a generally secular country with relatively low levels of religiosity and church attendance, but yet Putin has invested some significant political capital in religion (Hersh, 2018; Pertsev, 2017). The simple explanation is to suggest that his support of the church is largely symbolic, but the question remains, why? The story of Putin and the church comes into more relief when we consider how deeply interconnected religion is with some significant dimensions of Russian policy and national aspiration. For example, the 2019 split between the Russian and Ukrainian churches was deeply embedded in the geopolitics of Russian-Ukrainian relations (and a whole complex of European and Central European politics). The departure of the Ukrainian church from the Russian Orthodox fold was on one level "only" about religion, but on another level about deep imaginaries of Russian and Slavic history. Russian aspirations in Ukraine are rooted in—and invoke powerful registers of imagination around—the origin of the Russian nation in the 988 CE baptism of Vladimir the Great in what is now Kiev. In this and other ways, the Russian church, and the notion of Russia as a uniquely Christian provenance, provide deeply provocative and productive symbolic resources to Putin's politics (Stahle, forthcoming).

And these relations are uniquely and powerfully expressed through a set of media affordances. Central among these has been a Moscow-based television channel, Tsargrad TV (Ellis & Kolchyna, 2017). Sometimes called "the Fox News of Russia," to an American audience it would resemble a mixture of the Fox News channel and *The 700 Club* (the televangelism ministry of Pat Robertson). The link to Fox News is tangible. One of its senior producers is American Jack Hannick, who was formerly a producer for the program hosted by Trumpist provocateur Sean Hannity (Fine, 2018). A key figure in all of this is a Russian oligarch named Konstantin Malofeev, described as "the Russian Billionaire carrying out Putin's will across Europe" (Salhani, 2017, para. 1). Malofeev is both owner of Tsargrad TV and thought to be one of the financiers behind the Russian in Eastern Ukraine. Tsargrad TV is linked to American right-wing media, carrying such voices as the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Malofeev is devout Orthodox and a believer in an ultra-nationalist agenda linking the church with the State's domestic and global purpose. His television channel is a central platform for these interests.

More significant for my interest here are Malofeev's linkages to the American evangelicals whose relationship to Donald Trump parallels his to Putin (Salhani, 2017). He is part of a network linking conservative forces in the Russian church (supported by Russian Patriarch Kirin) and American evangelicals involved in the politically weaponized "religious freedom" discourse. This connection between the Russian church and American evangelicals who support Trump was given more momentum at an August 2018 World Summit in Defense of Christians, held in Washington (Burgess, 2018). The Russian delegation was led by Canadian-born Metropolitan Hilarion, who is the church's international ambassador. Fluent in North American English, he has appeared in various conservative Catholic and Protestant venues in the United States, identifying the Russian church with conservative stances on marriage, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ rights.

There are other contexts worth noting. Jair Bolsonaro's election to the Brazilian presidency is widely seen as a further example of these "new politics." He benefitted from the support of leaders of the Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal/evangelical movement (Machado, 2018). Further, each of these major ministries in Brazil is also "mediatic," to use the Brazilian term, meaning that they are extensively lodged in media and have sophisticated systems of production and distribution. Brazilian scholars who look at these relations note a striking resemblance to the American and Russian contexts (Cunha, 2021). Likewise, parallel relations can be seen in Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism and the ways that religious nationalist imaginaries define the underlying "Hindutva" movement (Thomas, 2021).

There is much ambiguity in these relations. I have already noted the seeming contradiction between Trump's public image and seeming moral values and the evangelicals who support him. Likewise, Putin and Orthodoxy and Bolsonaro and Pentecostalism are not a natural fit. Neither are Orthodoxy and American evangelicalism. Nor evangelicalism and Hindutva. There is also the long history of enmity between conservative Protestantism and Catholicism in the United States and elsewhere. Now that some of these forces have come into a sort of alliance, it is worth considering how these affinities make emic sense, and where this all might be going.

### **What Is All This Really About?**

A sense of common purpose is possible in part because these various forces share a common agenda (Marzouki, McDonnell, & Roy, 2016). From my research on their claims and appeals, it appears that they are interested in three primary things. First, they are motivated by a nostalgia for a halcyon past, where religion was more central to the culture, and cultural values hied more closely to religious values. Second, they hold to traditionalist views of norms in civil society centered in racialized identity, gender relations, LGBTQ rights, and the domestic sphere nucleus of the "virtuous" nation. Third, they all want the culture to once again be "marked" in a significant way by religion. In modernity, in each of these areas, they face powerful currents of social change. Thus, efforts to address grievance over lost religious ascendancy, to reorient social thought and social policy about the domestic sphere in more traditional directions, and to make sure that religion is explicitly at the center of social and cultural life rest on a set of appeals and values that contradict broad social trends and actually existing conditions on the ground.

Political science looked extensively at the question of what "interests" explained the neopopulist surge behind Trump's rise. In classic political terms, class-based and economic interests should be able to explain political behavior. Trump's rise seemed to have contradicted this axiom. Interesting research, however, has shown that the Trump's support can be better explained by things other than material "interests." Diana Mutz (2018) for example, has shown that economic or class interests had less to do with the Trump victory than theory would predict. Instead, she found something she chose to call "status threat" as the most important cause (Mutz, 2018). Within this status threat were a set of values and beliefs that articulate with broader appeals to grievance over the loss of a comforting cultural center. Mutz points to the racialized nature of these relations, but there is more to racialized grievance than the mere fact of race.

These relations are all about ambiguity and contradiction, then, and the purpose of my argument is to suggest ways that media are involved in this situation, and further to suggest ways that media analysis

might provide insights into it. At the same time, as I have said, there is a further challenge here to media scholarship as religion has not typically been on the media/cultural studies agenda. It is my hope that this effort can help address that lacuna.

### Centering Media and Religion

The reason that the interaction between media and religion are so obvious a point of inquiry here is that there are media that are directly and explicitly involved in these movements. I have already talked about the place of Tsargrad TV in the Russian case. In relation to Trump and his conservative religious supporters, there are some probative examples, as well. I'll focus on two of them here.

The first is the 2018 film *The Trump Prophecy* (Curlee & Eldredge, 2018). It is about a firefighter who had a dream in 2011 in which Donald Trump is elected president and saves the nation. It is a high-quality theatrical film produced by a Christian production company and the film department at conservative-Christian Liberty University. The film combined a dramatization of this prophecy and its role in the protagonist's life, with theological reflections from pro-Trump religious leaders. Among these reflections is the popular notion that Trump represents a modern-day King Cyrus (Stewart, 2018). Cyrus was the Persian King who freed the Jews without himself being a Jew. The parallel to Trump was that it was possible for God to work through him—as contradictory as it seems—because God can use even someone like Donald Trump, which is a further proof of God's power. The film was deeply rooted in "dominionist," theology which holds that the second coming of Christ will be hastened the more that Christians come into power in civil government (Ingersoll, 2015). Trump was seen as enabling this through his Cabinet and judicial appointments.

The second media example is also a film, this one produced by former Trump advisor and Breitbart media impresario Steve Bannon. Titled *The Torchbearer* (Bannon, 2016), the film starred a man named Phil Robertson, who was one of the figures in the American reality show *Duck Dynasty*. Robertson achieved fame in 2013 when he was suspended from the program because of antigay remarks. *The Torchbearer's* promotional website lays out its imaginative narrative:

"The Duck Commander" Phil Robertson, makes a compelling argument on the absurdity of life without God. Featuring real-life footage from events throughout history and leading up to the modern day crisis of radical Islamic terrorism, Phil personally guides us through a journey that includes Athens, Greece; Rome, Italy; Paris, France; and even the notorious Nazi death camp of World War II, Auschwitz. With a biblical perspective, Phil covers events ranging from the creation of the atomic bomb, the impact of the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement. He uses these events to illustrate that God is the only meaningful anchor to a civilized society and calls on all of us to consider our faith. (IMDB, 2016, Storyline, para. 1)

The film contains some remarkable arguments. Among them (as cited by Montgomery, 2016, paras. 8–9):

The film combines Robertson presenting an evangelical message of salvation through Jesus Christ with a theory about religion's role in human history and society. Says Robertson, "When you take out God as the anchor of your civilization you open the door to tyranny and instead of human rights you have the will to power of the ruler who makes himself the sole determiner of what is true and just. Might makes right." More specifically, it is a warning to Americans that societies not grounded in reverence and fear for the Judeo-Christian God, and His teachings on right and wrong, inevitably descend into depravity and brutality. Robertson says the Scopes trial on the teaching of evolution, during which H.L. Mencken mocked religious opponents of teaching evolution in schools, was "a watershed event that would slowly unravel the bond that wove the Creator into the very fabric of American life. God would be cast out of the public square, out of education, out of national discourse, out of the popular culture altogether."

I argue that each of these films and Tsargrad TV play a particular and compelling role in these new politics. They demonstrate the capacities of media imaginaries to afford powerful and facile accounts that resolve—in and through imaginaries—the contradictions that are rife "on the ground" in these cases. This fits into a larger argument that to understand contemporary neopopulist politics in the West and beyond, it is necessary to understand, or at least to have a grounded critical theoretical purchase on the way media, religion, and politics come together.

### **Signposts for Media Scholarship**

But this is not an easy or straightforward scholarly matter. As I have already said, religion remains an important lacuna in the scholarly fields surrounding culturalist media studies. Scholarship in the field lacks the banal conceptual tools that would undergird a substantive exploration here. Let me move them to consideration of this potential scholarly landscape, its challenges, and some potential considerations of ways to move forward, in more detail.

To pursue this line of inquiry it is necessary to see beyond (1) faith-based religion; (2) interest-based politics; and (3) information-centered media. Religion is not just about faith, or doctrine, or history, or clericalism. It is also something that can make powerful and compelling contributions to social and cultural action through its social and cultural symbolism, associations, and articulations into other social spheres. It can be powerful (as we see in these cases) through what it represents—by what symbolic claims it can sediment and legitimate. Politics is fundamentally about interests, but, in these cases, we can see interests that are not definitively expressed in material, economic, or class terms. Many American voters in the Trump era expressed interests that were far more moral or cultural than they were material. And media are not just sources of information that serve rational Habermasian discourse. They are also powerfully involved in the creation and circulation of imaginative narratives that can serve to elide the dissonances that emerge from the real and deep conditions on the ground in the material world. They can make the impossible or the unthinkable possible or thinkable. They can make Trump's or Putin's godly purpose real and coherent in a way that is contradicted by history. As such, they can be powerful political forces by calling into being interests in feeling, emotion, memory, nostalgia, and grievance.

### Outlining a Scholarly Inquiry

To pursue this implies a large and ambitious effort. Some lines of inquiry present themselves, and it is beyond my scope here to deal with each of them in detail. I will introduce a set of themes I would argue are critical to understanding these relations while at the same time foregrounding the mediation of religion.

First, *the problem of religion itself*. Much of the failure of media scholarship to critically engage religion lies in a tendency to see religion and media in binary terms. Most studies have focused either on the effects of media on religion or on the obverse. The cases we see here contest such a binary approach to the problem. In fact, it is necessary to see how media and religion might be articulated in Hall's sense (Hall et al., 1996). The evidence, here, is persuasive. Bannon's (2016) *The Torchbearer* does not fit easily into a binary paradigm. Nor do the other examples I have included here. *The Torchbearer* is not the product of religious or clerical authority, but instead depends for its authority on its aesthetics of imagination. It is not about religious faith, but rather is a vision of how religion ought to be at the center of secular politics. It is thus as much a political argument as it is a religious one. Indeed, it is a direct challenge to settled religious authority, particularly Catholic authority. A more extensive inquiry would need to account for the fact that many of the voices of new populism actually express great ambivalence about religion per se (Arato & Cohen, 2017; Roy, 2016).

Second, as has been argued elsewhere (Hoover, 2017, 2020), it is essential to understand the *provenance of Protestantism* as an "explanatory historiography" of media in modernity in general and American media in particular. Protestantism is deeply embedded in media change across North Atlantic modernity. The roots are in the print revolution, but a more complex and complicated history followed from early to late modernity. In the U.S. context, it is impossible to understand the role of the "ordinariness" and the "structures of feeling" that define American moral culture (and that thus constrain and condition American media practice) without accounting for the Protestant cultural and civic project. Protestantism is further implicated in the construction of American religious culture as a "marketplace of choice," and the differentiation and relativization of religious power and authority.

This Protestant legacy accounts for the easy and facile way that religious forces are articulated into politics and that religious interests stand alongside other interests in the rational and material marketplaces of contemporary politics. A further legacy of Protestantism particularly relevant here is its own history of media and mediation. The political cutting edge of contemporary religion in the U.S. context is evangelicalism, the evangelical revival of the mid-20th century, and the increasing presence of evangelicalism in politics that directly followed the emergence of evangelical media figures such as Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Falwell, Sr. It can be argued that these practices of mediation defined the resurgence of conservative Protestantism at midcentury. As Marsden (1991) has shown, this was effected in part by a conscious decision to center efforts on mass media ministries. Hendershot (2004) has charted how the Graham ministries in particular mounted efforts in radio, television, and film that became the very foundation of the (more moderate-seeming) "evangelicalism" that replaced the more controversial "fundamentalism" that had typified the Protestant right wing at the turn of the 20th century.



Media thus became central, and media figures, most notably Robertson and Falwell, led the movement to politicize this wing of American religion. Among the consequences of this is the centering of the media and “the mediatic” as plausible locations and sources of religious insight and political purpose. As Hoover (2019) has put it:

Several consequences of this history stand out. First, for American Protestants (and for Protestants elsewhere due to the influence of the American model) media and mediation are now commonly understood to be appropriate, even enchanted extensions of Christian purpose. There is little if any residual suspicion of media and media forms, particularly in conservative and evangelical circles. Second, religiously-motivated media creators and producers are experienced and sophisticated practitioners of their craft. Third, religiously-motivated media audiences are acclimated to the idea that media can be sources of profound truth and insight—that they can do the “business” of religion be it focused on confession and faith or on political or social activism. Fourth, this kind of religious media practice has also served to develop important networks of influence and circulation. Thus, in some ways, it is nearly impossible to describe a hermetic sphere within which unmediated religion (at least conservative religion) exists as a kind of pure form. No, religion today must contend with the reality that to exist, it must exist in—or with reference to—the media. And the particular history which has determined the outlines of this situation is a traceable Protestant history that flows through North American Protestantism and its articulation with media. (pp. 366–367)

Thus, it makes sense on more than one level to compare Tsargrad TV (for example) with “televangelism.” First, there is a specific form of that genre of television. Second, it is plausible today, in a way that it would not have been a generation ago, to conceive of something in the form of televangelism having secular political aspirations or effects. Third, the form—which originated in the United States—is now legible to global audiences and in global circulations. Fourth, for the religiously motivated among those audiences, the fact of television as a platform for religious purpose is now taken for granted. Finally, for the broader context of public and political discourse, “religious” media are no longer thought to be marginal, but instead are now known to have powerful potential to organize and embody politics.

This leaves aside the profound ways that modern media circulations can connect disparate movements such as these—and their adherents—in real time. These are global networks of interaction and purpose, made possible by modern media.

The third conceptual theme draws on a growing and significant literature in political science focused on *religious nationalisms*. More recent work by Brubaker (2012, 2017) has built on the earlier work of Friedland (2002) to establish a substantive inquiry into the nature and significance of specifically religiously inflected nationalisms. Brubaker has argued persuasively that we must understand these forces not as marginal expressions, but instead as substantive, even institutional, forces. Religious nationalists, he claims, operate in a sense as an independent force in contemporary politics, oriented to their own sources of power and ideology, and operating according to their own unique logics:

Religious nationalism must be understood in terms of its own cultural premises, not simply as a mediation of forces from elsewhere, as a sublimated economic grievance or a carrier of group identity, as a medium for old class politics or new identity politics. (Friedland, 2002, p. 381)

Friedland (2002) laid a foundation for rethinking the nature of these nationalisms by detailing the nature of those organizing logics:

A specific chain of four elements can be found in the symbolic order of all contemporary religious nationalisms. First, religious nationalism configures the territorial collectivity as a sacred space and a divinely invested subject. Religious nationalisms all focus on the penetration and permeability of the boundaries of that territorial space, whether by foreign investment, civil or foreign war, immigration, or a global commodified culture. The defense of the integrity of the territorial space, as in all nationalist projects, is the medium through which the coherence, identity, and power of the collective subject is known and narrated in every case of religious nationalism, there is an acute sense that that boundedness is at risk. Second, religious nationalists direct the bulk of their attention to the bodies of women—covering, separating, and regulating their erotic flesh. Third, religious nationalists accord considerable symbolic importance to money, to foreign money, to money out of control. And fourth, religious nationalists submit lovingly to God. (p. 396)

These dimensions of the religious-nationalist project are reflected in the movements I am considering here. The evangelicals behind Trump, the Orthodox church's agenda articulated through Putin, and (it appears, though it is early days yet) the shared interests of Bolsonaro and the neo-Pentecostals and Modi and Hindutva all seem to articulate a desire to recenter religion, to mark the culture with religion, and to recover traditionalist gender relations. These objectives, articulated through their media, echo the nationalist imaginaries predicted by Friedland.

This project will obviously need to explore and substantiate something of the logics, affordances, and aspirations of the religious-nationalist impulses that lie beneath the phenomena I have focused on, here. This also remains to be done, though tantalizing clues abound, not least in the record in relation to their own articulations of their goals and interests. Drawing on these works on religious nationalism, we can move to a further refinement of our understanding of the religion "object" in relation to the culture and politics I am looking at. To paraphrase the work of Brubaker (2012) and Friedland (2002; but see also Arato & Cohen, 2017), it is important to understand that the object of their efforts is the *nation* (that is, material political change in the secular world) more than it is "religion" (the salvation of souls).

Finally, a fourth theme requires substantive attention as I develop this project. That is the *mediated social imaginaries* (Alma & Vanheeswijck, 2018; Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014) that drew my attention in the first place. I have suggested that the approach might be a conceptual turn, combining a refined theoretical framing based on Anderson with exploration of theoretical resources through which we might better understand the central logics of these imaginaries as they are constituted in contemporary culture and politics by means of media circulations. We have seen the evidence in the cases I have introduced here.

There are, of course, many others, but how do we account for them? Are they merely media manifestations of deeper structural or material or institutional forces, or should we understand them more substantively on their own terms?

I would like to suggest that we think of these spectacular media as “affective infrastructures,” drawing on the work of Ahmed (2004a), Massoumi (1995), and others. By this I mean that their actual force and effect reside not in their particular narrative structures or claims, but rather in their ability to *affectively engage* cultural and political purpose. Ahmed (2004b, p. 120) has described affect as working in associative and “sticky” ways. These texts do not work because they are particularly effective or rational political arguments. They work because they afford rhetorical and discursive circulations that operate at some remove from the real and material. They thus serve the conditions I have described in these cases, where the whole enterprise depends on cultural discourses that can make rational and coherent that which in actually existing terms cannot stand. Further, they can articulate and motivate action in the political sphere, which attempts to craft goals in policy and social action.

I am contemplating an approach that is very much consonant with important work on affect in the fields of media and cultural studies. Zizi Papacharissi (2014) and Lillie Chouliaraki (2021), for example, have each developed important work on the concrete politics of how affect circulates in, and is instrumentalized by, media circulations and social networks. In this exploration of the politics of imaginative mediation around religious nationalism, I am looking in a slightly different direction. Rather than looking at media and affect in the context of relationships, networks, and social action (while not denying the critical relevance of these issues), I am focusing on these media as textual and circulative trajectories through which social imaginaries are deployed to do cultural “work.” They aspire to resolve contradictions between various material spaces and between material and imaginative registers of meaning and action. Further, they also exhibit historiographic evidence of their sources and trajectories of power and cultural purpose. No doubt they are intended to form communities and networks of purpose. My inquiry is about the logics of these projects of imagination and the ways that seemingly contradictory and disparate and diffuse social and cultural relations can be made plausible through affective imaginative constructions. While the outcomes of these efforts (what “happens”) are important, even critical, I am focusing at this stage on how the particular affective mediatic constructions have come to be and how they “make sense,” at least emically.

As affective infrastructures, such things as *The Trump Prophecy* (Curlee & Eldredge, 2018), *The Torchbearer* (Bannon, 2016), and Tsargrad TV make a different kind of sense than they do as mere media products. Their narrative structures are articulated toward a broad sense making and culture building where audiences are engaged on a different level than as mere “viewers.” They are “insiders” for whom these media—like the media of televangelism before them—are almost material contexts of plausibility and action. They are subjects, not objects of these media, and through these infrastructures, powerful and motivating senses of belonging and action are made possible and real.

We can see in this inquiry the possibility to bring critical media scholarship to bear in some new directions. This would allow, first, new approaches to understanding the role of media and mediations in contemporary politics. Media, particularly digital media, have had an increasing profile in political practice and political discourse. These examples show the more complex and layered ways that mediations of identity,

value, and purpose might further develop as forces in domestic and global politics. This project also brings new conceptual tools to bear on the problem and the question of religion in relation to media, and therefore addresses the long-standing lacuna in media studies around religion. In doing this, it might be able to demonstrate means by which media scholarship can look at "the religious" without following the inquiry down various dead ends focused on traditional understandings of the nature of religion. These new religious nationalisms illustrate in compelling detail the extent to which religion is no longer simply a matter of faith, doctrine, or clerical authority. It persists as a potent cultural resource that can be put to social and political purpose. That it does so through new systems and circulations of media makes it all the more interesting.

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