

Religious Populism? Rethinking Concepts and Consequences in a Hybrid Media Age

Introduction

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This introduction to a Special Section, *Global Populism: Its Roots in Media and Religion*, advances scholarly understanding of the present dynamics of global politics in the hybrid media environment from a perspective that is often neglected or undermined in media and communication studies: religion and/or “the religious” dimension. To incorporate better scholarship of religion into media and communication studies on populism, this introduction argues for a need to analyze more closely the interplay between the three and place special emphasis on (1) definitions concerning religion and populism, (2) the scale of analysis, and (3) transformations in the present media environment as hybrid. The articles address populism, media, and religion in a variety of media-related political and cultural contexts ranging from Europe to India and Brazil. The authors address populism in multiple political and religious contexts with a special focus on nationalist and right-wing politics.

Keywords: religious populism, hybrid media, right-wing politics, nationalism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism

If we were to use one word to describe the recent trend in global politics, *populism* would no doubt be a strong candidate. From Donald Trump to Jair Bolsonaro to Narendra Modi to Giorgia Meloni, right-wing populist movements have upended assumptions about contemporary politics and have seeded concern about the future of liberal democracies across the globe. Yet, as media studies scholars, we believe another candidate could be the term *hybrid media*. We understand hybrid media to describe a contemporary

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communication environment in which old and new forms of mediated communication are infused in new ways (Chadwick, 2013). When combining the two together—populism and hybrid media—we can paint a picture of how today’s global politics flows through a complex network of political actors, publics, legacy news media, and social media all loosely woven together. In this Special Section, we wish to advance scholarly understanding of the present dynamics of global politics in the hybrid media environment from a perspective that we argue is critical but often neglected or undermined in media and communication studies: religion and/or “the religious” dimension.

Emergent populist movements increasingly use symbols and tropes in their political communication (e.g., DeHanas & Shretin, 2021; Marzouki, McDonnell, & Olivier, 2016; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021) that draw on remembered, repressed, contested, implicit, and/or explicit valences of “the religious.” To use Yilmaz and Morieson’s (2021) terms: “Religious populism is a reality in the 21st century” (p. 20). Just by reading global news, we learn about religion and populism shaking hands in such diverse contexts and corners of the globe as in Modi’s India, Putin’s Russia, Trump’s United States, Erdogan’s Turkey, Bolsonaro’s Brazil, and Orbán’s Hungary, just to give some examples.

Yet, religion and “the religious” tend to be ignored or acknowledged only at the most superficial level in the present research in media and communication studies (Hoover, 2020). There may be a number of explanations for this situation, from the widespread assumption that modern societies are becoming more “secularized” to the belief that religion is best understood only as an ideology (see e.g., Beckford, 2003). We argue that these assumptions have led religion to be either marginalized or instrumentalized in media and communication research if it is addressed at all. However, contemporary conditions, such as those of concern in this special section, make it clear that religion is neither “going away” nor that it can be narrowed to mere ideology (Gauthier, 2020). The articles in this volume illustrate that serious and substantive focus on religion and “the religious” in relation to media can provide critical insights into contemporary social, political, and cultural conditions. To incorporate better scholarship of religion into media and communication studies on populism, we need to analyze more closely the interplay between the three. While there are many intellectual paths one could follow here, we wish to identify three aspects we find particularly relevant to address in this context: definition, scale, and hybrid mediation.

Multifaceted Definitions

The first issue deals with a question of definition. How to define religion in populism? In other words, what do we mean when we talk about religion in connection to populism? We argue that to further develop media and communication research on religion and global populism, we need to work on a definition and understanding of religion that acknowledges the complexity of the concept and is, at the same time, sensitive to its contextual adaptations. This understanding should recognize a classical distinction between substantialist and functionalist definitions of religion (Berger, 1974). In a substantialist definition, special emphasis is placed on the content and dogma of religion and religion as an institution (e.g., the Church). In a functionalist approach, special focus is given to what religion (or religiosity) does in people’s lives. Here the focus is on the analysis of symbols, rituals, and other religiously inspired practices that may well align with nationalism or other belief systems (cf. Bellah, 1991; Marvin & Ingle, 1996).

When we look at the interplay between religion and populism from the substantialist definitional perspective, we can see how populist politics makes alliances with certain religious groups and denominations to gain more popularity and ground among such voters. Yilmaz, Morieson, and Demir (2021) call this development "religious populism" and argue that it can be identified in many world religions, thus challenging the idea that certain religions are more likely to be merged with populist politics than others. Looking from an empirical perspective, we could apply a substantialist definition to study, for example, Donald Trump and his evangelical supporters and their highly influential alliance in the United States (see Fea, 2018; Posner, 2020). Other examples of where to apply a substantialist definition in the study of religious populism and media may include work that looks at Buddhist populist representations in Myanmar and how the Muslim minority (Rohingya) in those representations is constructed as a threat and enemy of the "people" (here the Buddhist majority) living in Myanmar (Yilmaz et al., 2021).

When the focus turns to the more functionalist understanding of religion, we may label this "identitarian populism" as defined by Yilmaz and colleagues (2021). In this definitional context, we may look at for example empirical cases where the public debates around religious symbols in public spaces are "hijacked" by right-wing populist movements in societies such as France and Italy, as these movements fight against public visibility of (Muslim) religion and its symbols (Roy, 2016).

In recent years, the discursive definition of religion (see e.g., Hjelm, 2020; Johnston & von Stuckrad, 2021) has begun to gain more ground in the sociology of religion. In this approach, religion is understood to be constructed in different types of discourses carried out in a variety of contexts and frameworks. Such discourses may address issues-related meaning and purpose of life, ethical and moral concerns of human existence, and our place in this world (Hjelm, 2020). Understood in this way, a discursive definition of religion can be applied to study diverse populist debates or controversies around religion. The Hungarian populism of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stands out as one example. Orbán can be described as effectively using different strategies to discursively reconstruct Christianity in the public space as a nationalist religion and he uses this idea to politically exclude non-Christians (read Muslims) in Hungary as "others," not belonging to the Christian nation (Ádám & Bozóki, 2016). We may also think of for example Brubaker's (2017) analyses of "Christianist" approach to populism in the Northern Europe in this discursive definitional framework. In this line of thinking, certain European values (of human life, equality) are discursively constructed drawing on an assumed common Christian heritage and then utilized by populist actors to symbolically and discursively construct Europe as a more civilized culture compared to others (usually Islam).

If the concept of religion demands a nuanced approach here, so does the concept of populism. The task is not easy, as there is no consensus among scholars of political communication how to define the concept (Brubaker, 2020). Among the different schools of thought, perhaps the most explicit dividing line goes between "essentialist" and "nonessentialist" approaches to populism (e.g., Palonen, 2018). While scholars such as Cas Mudde (2004) argue for certain "content elements" particularly typical of and for populism (see also Brubaker, 2017, p. 363), others, taking after Ernesto Laclau (2005), tend to emphasize populism as an anti-essentialist construction. Scholars following this line of thought argue that the "populist moment" cannot be specified beforehand but can only be discursively constructed and is thus highly context and situation bound (Sumiala, Harju, & Palonen, in this Section). One potential way of defining populism

and escaping the essentialist versus nonessentialist controversy in populism studies is to look at populism as a *style* and a *strategy of communication* (Moffit, 2016). In this approach populism is understood as a repertoire of discourses including performative elements such as gestures, use of emotional tone, image, and symbols (DeHanas & Shretin, 2018, p. 179).

Despite the definitional difference concerning the "ontological" basis of the concept of populism, many still agree that one of the driving forces behind today's populist movements and related populist communication is the idea of defending "the people" against "the elites" in society (Herkman, 2017, 2022; Moffit, 2016). This dichotomy is built around a dualist logic and a moral hierarchy between "us," "the people," as "good" and "them," "the Other," as "evil." Furthermore, this speaking on behalf of "the people" in populism is often carried out by applying two key strategies: restoration and battle (Marzouki et al., 2016). Here "restoration" refers to looking back in history and rehabilitating certain values (e.g., the Christian heritage of Europe) and "battle" refers to opposing and standing against trends, tendencies, and worldviews and beliefs that are considered to threaten those values (e.g., globalism, secularism).

We argue that the contested dynamics between "the people" and "the elites" (as given and/or constructed) coupled with ideas related to restoration and battle provide fruitful means for analyzing interconnections between religion and populism. To push the argument further, we may consider this project to seek a *sacralization* of people in those populist discourses (DeHanas & Shretin, 2018). Trump campaign slogans such as "Make America Great Again" or the Brexit leave campaign in the United Kingdom declaring "Take Back Control" illustrate such yearnings, which may simultaneously point to nostalgic and emancipatory politics.

But liaisons between religion and populism and the related sacralization of people and/or anti-elitism are not only a contemporary phenomenon. There are populist traces in the history of religions. Christianity is an example. The biblical narrative of Jesus going against the established Jewish religious elites and accusing them of hypocrisy and "Pharisaism" is an early example in the history of Christianity of a populist attitude of anti-elitism. This historical thread of anti-elitism and suspicion of the established Church elites can also be identified as a development profoundly embedded in the history of Protestantism and the legacy of Martin Luther and other Reformation leaders (Pettegree, 2015; Ryrie, 2017). In the later history of Protestantism, the contested dynamics between the Protestant Church elites and grassroots religious movements can be seen to have given birth to a broad range of religious revival movements in Scandinavia as well as multiple denominations and congregations in the Anglo American Protestant landscape (Grell, 1994; Sinnemäki, Nelson, Portman, & Tilli, 2019; Ward, 1992).

Interestingly enough, this trend in the religious history of Protestantism is also profoundly embedded in the history of communication media and the very idea of dissemination of religious texts in print and copies and their circulation among lay people and related, wider publics (Horsfield, 2015). We argue, then, that a comprehensive analysis of religious populism must take into an account not only histories of religion but also of media (Laughlin, 2021; Lundby, 2019).

Expanding Scales

If we want to advance our scholarly understanding of religious populism and its interplay with media, it is necessary to take into consideration how both religion and media share the aim of geographical and cultural expansion. While not all religions are missionary religions, many are deeply rooted in the idea of universal mission. Christianity and Islam—the world’s largest religions—stand out as examples. At the same time, modern media industries drive to internationalize and globalize communication (Morley, 2007). Then, modern media technology forms the geography on which these religious populist movements play their roles. Both religious actors and media conglomerates have created global spheres of meaning (we are not at the same time arguing that they are coherent or determinative spheres). Instead, we maintain that it is vital to understand the complex traces and trajectories embedded in religious and/or media histories and how these beliefs are internalized and activated in the global spread of religious and religious-inflected populism.

For example, in Islam the idea of *Ummah* has special significance. One scholar of Islamic populism, Vedi Hadiz (2018), explains how the idea of Ummah (as a supranational community of believers) provides a shared imaginary of “Ummah-based political identity” for Muslim believers. This identity of “the people” established around the idea of shared religion is not based on national, ethnic, or political boundaries. Based on his work in Indonesia, Hadiz (2018) argues that this political identity provides a cultural resource to build up new types of cross-class alliances that can work against perceived economic and cultural oppressors and/or sources of threat, whether domestic or foreign (p. 567). And we might trace a similar understanding of the role of religious belonging to the Jewish understanding of diasporic belonging. Christians have a similar concept in the global “Body of Christ.” Global, religiously-inspired populism, whether Christian, Jewish, or Islamic, has the potential and power to attract “the people” who live in different cultural and societal conditions and under diverse political systems.

And the way that religions understand themselves to be global can be used by right-wing populists as is the case with the so-called coalition of “Christian traditionalists” assembled around the efforts of social actors, such as the American populist activist Steve Bannon. This global coalition includes diverse religious groups and churches from American evangelicals to Italian Catholics to Russian Orthodox believers. Although representing different, and even opposing, views about the content of Christianity, they come together in public to defend “family values” and raise concerns about “Islamic fascism” threatening “Christian civilization” (Steinmetz-Jenkins & Noble, 2017). Indeed, they seem to be trying to spark a “clash of civilizations” between Christian traditionalists and Muslim nations.

While the global approach to religiously inspired populism—especially when looking at Christianity and Islam—adds value and helps us grasp some new dynamics, themes, networks, and power concentrations in today’s populism, we cannot ignore the historical marriage of religiously inspired populism and nationalism (see e.g., Brubaker, 2020). A considerable body of research (Marzouki et al., 2016) that addresses religion and “the religious” in present-day populism is discussed in the context of the nation-state. Many studies that address religion and populism in different European societies typically focus on the relationship between Catholicism and populist parties in European countries such as France, Italy, Austria, Poland, and Hungary. Another common research trend focuses on the national-level debates about Islam as religion of “the Other” in connection to migration, xenophobia, and terrorism (Abdel-Fadil & Liebmann, 2018; Göle, 2013; Lundby, 2018).

In the context of the United States, the so-called Trump era brought religious politics and particularly religious nationalism very much to the center of political discourse. Religious nationalism—now coded increasingly as “White Christian Nationalism” (Jones, 2020)—has become more of a commonplace term in political discourse and political journalism. Among the many crises of the Trump era, a number can be seen as moments where a construct that combines forces of religion, nationalism, and mediation is increasingly obvious. While there have been some scholarly efforts to trace these developments (e.g., Hoover, 2020) much of the journalistic discourse (e.g., Stewart, 2020) has failed to fully appreciate how each of these factors needs to be seen as generative of powerful cultural and political dynamics. That is a goal of this volume.

Hybrid Circulations of Populism

Perhaps the most urgent challenge in studying the intersections between religion and populism in the present context has to do with the analytical perception of today’s hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2013). Hybrid media offer new tools and platforms to communicate, share and disseminate political ideas and identities and, thus establish new global belongings around the idea of “the people.” The aforementioned example of Ummah stands out. In addition, the hybrid media environment challenges conventional ideas related to religious authority—that is, who has the power to talk and communicate in the name of religion (Campbell, 2021; Hoover, 2016)? Whose voices are valid? Those of state-sanctioned religious figures blaring from television screens? Or those voices from the margins empowered by social media platforms? What follows is pluralization (more voices, also from below) and multiplication of religious agency (revisiting hierarchies connected to the voice) in populist political communication mediated in a hybrid media environment.

In addition, a hybrid media environment results in a potential acceleration of communication. In this logic (Sumiala, Valaskivi, Tikka, & Huhtamäki, 2018) the louder the voice, the more attention it is given in clicks, shares, and/or comments, thus boosting the social construction of a given phenomenon. Lastly, the relevance of affective visual communication should not be underestimated. Emotions of fear, anger, and disgust fuel the global growth of religiously inspired populist communication. One widely recognized example of religious populism has to do with Islamophobic communication and its circulation in the current hybrid media environment. In this context, affective populist communication is typically generated around xenophobia and racialized othering (Morey, Yaqin, & Forte, 2021). A hybrid media environment, thus, provides a critical context for the contemporary study of religion and populism in a global framework in which different types of religiously inspired agencies, authorities, and emotions attached to diverse religious and/or nonreligious positions as well as technological affordances embedded in datafication and platformization of communication all shape their cultural and political outcomes (Valaskivi, 2022).

The articles in this Special Section address populism, media, and religion in a variety of media-related political and cultural contexts ranging from Europe to India and Brazil. The authors also address populism in multiple political and religious contexts with a special focus on nationalist and right-wing politics. Religions addressed in these political contexts include Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. The individual articles are grouped as follows. The first section of articles discusses religious populism in the context of Christianity in Europe and in South America. The second group analyzes the multifaceted populist discourses stemming from European projections toward Islam as well as Muslim-driven populist discourses in Turkey. The last section

comes back to intersections between religious populism and nationalist politics by placing special emphasis on the Indian and Hindu context.

Giulia Evolvi's article, "The World Congress of Families: Anti-Gender Christianity and Digital Far-Right Populism" analyses populist politics in the context of Italian Catholicism. Agnieszka Stępińska's article continues to develop similar themes in the Polish context. Her article, titled "The Role of Religion in Construction of the People and the Others: A Study of Populist Discourse in the Polish Media," gives special emphasis to empirical analysis of populist phenomena in Polish newspapers. Magali do Nascimento Cunha moves the focus from European populism to South America. Her study, "Brazil Above Everything. God Above Everyone': Political-Religious Fundamentalist Expressions in Digital Media in Times of Ultra-Right Nationalism in Brazil," provides an analysis of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's populist politics and use of evangelical Christian rhetoric to address "the people." Johanna Sumiala, Anu Harju, and Emilia Palonen discuss religion and populism in the Scandinavian framework of Civilizationism and Islamophobia. Their article, titled "Islam as the Folk Devil Hashtag Publics and the Fabrication of Civilizationism in a Post-Terror Populist Moment," analyzes populism, in particular on Twitter. Mona Abdel-Fadil's article continues with the Scandinavian context and social media. The focus of this study, titled "Triggers and Tropes: The Affective Manufacturing of Online Islamophobia," which analyzes construction of Islamophobia, is on affective communication as a means of populist style. Bilge Yesil's article, "Mediating Muslim Victimhood: An Analysis of Religion and Populism in International Communication," expands analysis of populism and religion in the Turkish media context and explores victimization of Islam as a populist strategy. The last empirical article in this Section is by Pradip Thomas, who maps Hindu populism in India. His study is titled "Populism, Religion, and the Media in India." Finally, John L. Jackson, Jr. provides an epilogue to the Section.

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