

From “Threads” to Threats: Religion, the Public Sphere, and Why Scholars Need to Keep an Eye on Online “Posts”

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Abstract

What is the definition of religion; according to whom; and why does it matter? For the student of religion, this is the first and most complex set of questions confronting the scholar when embarking on his or her academic training. This article is the result of two occurrences related to the set of questions above: a casual conversation with a friend about the portrayal of religion in the media, and an online news article that appeared on a South African news website with the headline, “Religion Forces Science Teacher to Quit”. These occurrences led to a rephrasing of the original set of questions. Far away from the quiet corridors of academic libraries and the pews of religious institutions, how is the term *religion* understood and used in contemporary society? Where can I start looking? And why does it matter? The first part of this article is a theoretical exploration of the use and understanding of the term *religion*; the notion of the public sphere according to Jürgen Habermas; the media as public sphere; and finally, religion in the media as public sphere. By way of using, but also contesting, Habermas’s and other theories of media and the public sphere, the second part of the article will attempt a brief analysis of the online news article and reader comments.

Introduction

What is the definition of religion; according to whom; and why does it matter? For the student of religion, this is the first and most complex set of questions confronting the scholar when embarking on his or her academic training. This article and the questions that proceed from it are the result of two occurrences related to the set of questions above. Important to note is that neither of the occurrences took place anywhere near the quiet corridors of an academic institution, or the local church or mosque. It happened on a lazy afternoon in casual conversation, on Facebook, and on an online news website.

Recently, in conversation with a self-admittedly non-religious friend from the United Kingdom whom I will call David, I was struck by what a negative view he had of religion, religious people, and what he perceives as the role of religion in society. On enquiry into the source of his perception of religion, David admitted that this view was not formed by ever personally having had a “religious” experience, being involved with a “religious” organisation, or even based on his contact with “religious” people. His opinion, he said, was mainly formed by what he read and saw of religion and the religious in the media – not religious media, but the news. What did David understand by the term “religion”? According to his experience, religion entails belief in a supernatural being and strange stories of appearances of deities in smoke clouds and window reflections; and finally, religion mostly relates to some sort of being “in conflict”.

The following week, on logging into my Facebook account and scrolling down my “newsfeed”, I was struck by the headline of an article posted by a “friend” on his “wall”. It read, “Religion Forces Science Teacher to Quit”. Another reason the headline caught my attention was the string of comments made in reaction to the post. I followed the link to the article that had originally appeared on *News24*, a South African news website. The article, by journalist Duncan Alfreds (2012), tells the story of a science teacher in an upmarket Cape Town school who was allegedly reprimanded by both other teachers and parents for teaching evolution as part of the science curriculum. It is not clear from the article whether the teacher chose to leave the school or was asked to leave. According to the teacher in question, who asked to stay anonymous, most of the other staff at the school were Christians.

The article, which scored a total of 538 “shares” on Facebook, was also accompanied by multiple threads of online reader comments that seemed to refer less to the specific story in question and more to religion, science, and personal convictions in general.

Despite some general concerns I had regarding the article, it was specifically the headline and subsequent reader comments that I found quite

concerning — concerning in that the way the journalist and most readers' comments portrayed a particularly limited understanding and definition of religion, which they deemed natural and universally true.

Both my conversation with David and the online news article led me to wonder, far away from the quiet corridors of academic libraries and religious institutions: how is the term *religion* understood and used in contemporary society; where is contemporary public opinion on religion formed; under what conditions is it formed; whose opinion does it reflect; and why does it matter? The aim of this article is to explore these questions by analysing the aforementioned article, "Religion Forces Science Teacher to Quit" and the subsequent reader comments in the light of theories relating to religion and the media (specifically online media) as public sphere.

Defining Religion

According to Jonathan Z. Smith (1998: 269), the use and understanding of the term *religion* has been fraught with issues since its use and expansion in the sixteenth century. Not only has the meaning of the term been misunderstood by religious insiders as a given that is natural, universal, and familiar to all humankind; the term has also mostly been used as a naming from the outside, rather than a form of first-person self-characterisation (*ibid.*). Smith's own definition qualifies *religion* as an anthropological, rather than theological, term describing human thought and actions — specifically, the kinds of thought and actions that pertain to belief and norms of behavior (*ibid.*).

However, scholars are not the only ones using and disputing the meaning of the term *religion*. According to Michael Strausberg (2009: 7), lay theories of varying quality purporting to interpret and explain religion can be found everywhere: in various religious and nonreligious discourses, and in diverse forms and frequencies. Lay theories, states Strausburg (*ibid.*), might overlap with, borrow from, and compete with academic theories, but ultimately they remain carriers of understanding and therefore, of reality.

At the end of a book researching popular culture, media, and religion, editor Gordon Lynch (2007: 125) reflects on one important gap in the literature pertaining to the field: that of the understanding and use of the term *religion* in popular culture. According to Lynch, the term is more often than not perceived as having a relatively straightforward meaning (*ibid.*). Here, states Lynch, there is great potential for theories adding to the debate of how religion is actually understood and used in contemporary society (2007: 126). Where, then, is the scholar to look for contemporary lay theories interpreting religion? It is here that we turn to religion and the media as public sphere.

Religion, the Media, and the Public Sphere

What Is the Public Sphere?

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) Jürgen Habermas defines the “public” by means of the distinction people generally make between that which is “open to all” and that which is “closed” or “exclusive”. However, according to Habermas, although “open to all” may be the general notion of “public”, what people actually refer to when they say “public”, “public opinion”, or “public sphere” is the idea of the very critical function of the public as the carrier of public opinion (1989: 2).

The popular use of the coffee shop as a metaphor for the public sphere has its origins in Habermas’s “basic blueprint” of the public sphere, described in terms of the development of a bourgeois public sphere in the coffee houses and salons of Europe between 1680 and 1730 (1989: 127, 134). In the Habermasian coffee shop, private people came together as a public for the public use of reason (1989: 27). No longer were matters concerning the private sphere relegated exclusively to the authorities; instead, they were considered by the subjects as that which was “properly theirs” (1989: 23). In this coffee shop, the criteria applied to discourse included a disregard for status, a problematisation of the status quo, and a measure of inclusivity. The issues discussed had to be of such a nature that everyone would be able to participate (1989: 36-37).

For Habermas (1989: 4, 169), however, with the advent of mass media and the subsequent expansion of the public sphere also came the commodification, disintegration, and functional insignificance of the public sphere as its essence was transformed from agent of social change to consumer product. In the public sphere as administered by mass media, according to Habermas (1989: 171-172), lines between the private and public become blurred as that which was publicly relevant became personalised beyond recognition and that which was private and publicly insignificant became widely publicised. “The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only”, states Habermas (1989: 171), as the public sphere becomes something “made” and not something simply “there” (1989: 201). The public sphere that used to consist of the public use of reason, according to Habermas, now consists of “the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical” (1989: 175). The public use of reason, the function of the public sphere, now happens in private, non-publicly.

The Habermasian notion of the public sphere as described above has been critiqued and widely debated amongst scholars. According to Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (2006: 4), this notion is both too normative and too universalistic. The main points of debate, according to Richard Butsch

(2007: 4), relate to Habermas's criteria for the public sphere. These include the notion of equality amongst participants and reason as the foundation of the public sphere.

Much debate also revolves around Habermas's condemnation of twentieth-century media for the disintegration of the public sphere (ibid.). Theorists, states Butsch, have advocated for a notion of the public sphere that is more alternative and that relates to multiple public spheres, rather than to a single public sphere (ibid.).

In general, there have been mixed reactions towards the notion of the mass media as public sphere. According to Butsch (2007: 1), concerns regarding the potential threat of mass media have been prevalent throughout the twentieth century as theorists and laypersons alike have feared its implication in the erosion of the public sphere and democracy. A recurring question regarding issues of mass media and the public sphere, according to Butsch (2007: 3), remains whether the media enable or undermine a healthy public sphere.

Other theorists, however, while acknowledging the critique of the media as public sphere, view the media as constituting quite an essential public sphere. According to Meyer and Moors (2006: 4), the media remain important in facilitating "alternative notions and possibilities of the public and of what it means to be a person or part of an audience". Whilst being careful to not use the public sphere in a normative sense, Meyer and Moors (ibid.) cite the importance of the Habermasian notion of the media as public sphere in generating debate about identity, community, and the linkages between religion, media, the state, and society. Butsch (2007: 3) even points out how media have now almost become the "primary focus and force for today's public sphere". The central questions, states Butsch (2007: 3), no longer revolve around the legitimacy of the media as public sphere, but rather around what kinds of publics are formed by different media.

What about Religion and the Media as Public Sphere?

According to David Morgan (2008: 1), studies about religion and the media intensified after the 1990s. Before this, it was assumed that studies on mass media simply did not include religion, or that mass media "compromised, diluted or eviscerated" religious belief in some way (ibid.). During the last three decades, states Morgan (2008: 3), the role of the media in the construction of meaning and a meaningful world has been acknowledged, and so also the inclusion of religion in the study of mass media. The different styles and formats of the various media, according to Meyer and Moors (2006: 11), point to the potential transformations religion could undergo as it moves to the "public" via the media — implications that might be difficult for religious institutions to control.

In a recent discussion paper on religion and digital culture, Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (2012: 2) refer to past studies on digital media and their potential “implications for religion and the meaning of ‘the religious’ ... its legitimated structures, contexts and practices”. In this paper, Hoover and Echchaibi introduce an understanding of digital spaces, which they call “third spaces”, as large, fluid, and evolving, with their wide range of “old traditions, new traditions, non-traditions, hybrid traditions, and aggressively ‘anti’ traditions” (2012: 1). The possible implications these spaces could hold for religion, according to Hoover and Echchaibi (2012: 5), are immense. The authors even go as far as imagining how these spaces could “re-imagine religion” — with, of course, profound consequences for religious authority.

Analysis: Online News Article and Reader Comments

In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, editors Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen question why so many of our theories on religion and the public sphere bear so little resemblance to our everyday realities. Religion, they argue, “is neither merely private, for instance, nor purely irrational. And the public sphere is neither a realm of straightforward rational deliberation nor a smooth space of unforced accent.” (2011: 1)

It is for this reason that I chose to examine what might seem like a single insignificant news article and its accompanying online reader comments. In the news article and comments in question, we find religion entering the public sphere — not through academic deliberation nor via religious institutions, but via the media, in ways that are (1) quite contrary to the Habermasian normative view of the public sphere; (2) quite consistent with theories of the media and their multiple contesting publics; (3) quite in tune with Habermas’s concern with the media and its implications for the public sphere; and (4) quite contrary to the ambitious views of what new media might mean for the re-imagining of religion.

What are the features of an online news article; who is excluded; how is information circulated; how is the term *religion* understood and used in the media as public sphere; what kind of publics are formed; what are the implications of this; and why does it matter? Using basic media theory in analysing a few features of the online news article and online reader comments, I explore some of these general questions.

On “Sharing”

An important feature of online news websites is the tool with which readers can “share” an article on multiple social network sites. The article “Religion Forces Science Teacher to Quit” appeared on www.news24.com on 6 March

2012 and was “shared” on Facebook a total of 538 times in subsequent weeks.

The implication of this feature of online news is that news is now circulated by readers at the click of a button. It gets widely and rapidly circulated by anyone who owns a social media account or email address of some sort and is able to click “share”. Although access to the full text of an article is possible through the link shared on social media platforms, it is mostly the headline that is viewed by other users. The headline appears in online search engines and thus attracts users to read or comment on the article. The headline is therefore key in the circulation of the news story.

On Leading with the Headline

The use of the term *religion* in the headline “Religion Forces Science Teacher to Quit” is immediately concerning. What does the author understand by the term *religion*? Is he writing about a specific religious group, or about religion in general? Taking the entire news story into consideration, the journalist uses the term *religion* in the headline as a way of referring to a group of teachers with a specific anti-evolutionist belief; a group whom the science teacher in question claims to be “mostly Christian”. Other references to “religion” or “religious” groups in the article include a quote by the science teacher stating that he had once met a Muslim biology teacher who refused to teach evolution and a Christian geography teacher who refused to teach plate tectonics.

What is also of concern is the use of the term *religion* in opposition to terms such as *science*. The word *force*, which commonly implies conflict or violence, is used as a verb. By using *religion*, *force*, and *science* in that sequence, a binary is set up between religion and science, situating religion as the oppressive “doer” forcing out science, and the educator as the defenseless subject being acted upon. The headline also serves a particular news value that possibly informed the word choice and framing of the story: namely, conflict sells.

My suggestion is that the choice and structure of the news story, with its emphasis on conflict, binaries, and a limited understanding of the term *religion*, attracts a kind of public and publics that commonly entertain the use of binaries, especially pertaining to the theme of religion versus science. It also, I would suggest, attracts publics with limited understandings and interpretations of religion. These public registers become visible when examining the reader comments in particular.

“Add Your Comment”

A prominent feature of online news websites is the section following the news article that invites readers to “comment on this story”. Here readers are allowed to enter the digital space and comment in an anonymous

capacity. On the *News24* website a total of 1110 comments were made by both anonymous and identified readers of the article "Religion Forces Science Teacher to Quit".

Superficially, the comment section of *News24* might, with its user-friendly structure, seem a new kind of mediated public sphere promoting inclusivity and equality. However, entering this public space requires not only a digital device, but also an internet connection, proficiency in reading and writing English (although that is debatable), computer literacy, and online media literacy. These constraints immediately qualify a fairly exclusive "public". Also, although the comment section is a "free space" where anyone is allowed to post any comment on the specific matter, there are some restrictions. These are set out in the *News24* comments policy, accessible online. Another feature allows readers to report, and therefore regulate, comments they perceive as obscene or derogatory. Thus, a number of factors condition the inclusivity of this particular "public space".

So What Are the Readers Saying?

Reflective of the tone set by the headline, conflict and binary opposites emerge as a dominant theme in the comment section. For example, the very first comment, from "E=MC2", reads:

Ooohhh damn, here we go: In the one corner, weighing in at 5 grams (being the worm we all came from) ... EVOLUTION. In the other corner, weighing ... who knows how much ... THE CHRISTIANS. Round ONE — DING DING DING DONG.

Other recurring binaries invoked by commentators are religion versus science, creationism versus evolution, belief versus fact, fiction versus fact, and false versus true. Another commentator, "Jeffrey", writes:

All the scientific facts support the scientific Theory of Evolution. Now you don't have to "believe" in Evolution, but keep that belief out of the classroom, and save it for the religious education sessions, where they can debate it and creationism till the cows come home, or until Jesus comes back, if you prefer.

Correspondingly, "Barry Mercer" states:

Religion is a belief, evolution is fact. Simple Facts versus Fiction. If a person wishes to ignore fact over a belief all well and good but that should not deny fact being taught

to enquiring minds. Once a person understands evolution they are in a position to evaluate fact from fiction for themselves.

Expressing a similar sentiment, “Franco” asserts:

Teach science in the classroom, belief in the church.

Contrary to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere as a forum for the public use of reason in the form of deliberation, commentators attempt to either persuade or ridicule each other, sometimes with the use of scientific reason and other times with strong emotion arising from personal experiences. In these instances, statements persistently reflect individual perceptions about what is “real”, “reality”, and “truth”. Commentators also seem to portray their own views as representing one unified and true public, whether as representatives of their specific religious or nonreligious group or humanity in general. The comments listed below, however, also demonstrate the existence of the multiple and intersecting publics that commentators are demarcating and participating in.

Millions around the world, including scientists, reject evolution for what it is — fraud of the century. Apart from that, until they can “explain” the beginning, you don’t go an inch further. Explain how a bang occurred without an explosion and if an explosion “did” occur, what exploded and what set it off. I, along with many believe in creation, and know the Creators name. He baptised me and I assure you, I know Him. There are reputable scientists who concur with me. Read “In Six Days: Why Fifty Scientists Chose to believe in Creation”, 2001 and “The Genesis Files: Meet 22 Modern Day Scientists Who believe in Six Day Recent Creation”, 2004. And now, sit back and view a misguided and futile attempt to discredit these people. (“Dirk”)

In the first place — the Bible is a religious handbook, not a science handbook. It teaches Who created, and Why he created. There is no ways that science can tell us the answers to those questions. (“Piet Strydom”)

I have witnessed the power of God and seen Miracles, so you cannot say God does not exist because of Science and man’s thinking ... BUT, you can say man’s thinking and science exists because of God! (“Saint Bruce”)

@Vaal-Donkie — of course religion exists! The proof is around us everyday. But proof that what religion believes is true? That some kind of sentient god exists? Nope, no proof of that at all. (“Lanfear”)

School is there to teach you about reality, the real world, and how to work and succeed in the real world. Telling pupils that everything in this life is meaningless because when they die they will spend eternity in Heaven or Hell is hardly motivating, especially for such young people, who have enough homework and studies to attend to. (“TSR01”)

@Johan. You are a fool to the chemicals in your brain. You feel “God coming into your heart”. I feel serotonin being released. Giving me a euphoric high. I felt it when I gave my life to Jesus, luckily he doesn’t exist, so I could just take it back ... You need to question your evidence free convictions, cause I assure you that people of other faiths feel just as strongly as you. Evidence is key. REAL EVIDENCE. EVIDENCE!! (“Clarve”)

Finally, and reflective of the use and understanding of the term *religion* in the headline, many of these commentators, both for and against religion, communicate an understanding and interpretation of religion that remains quite limited and traditional. Religion, in most of the 1110 comments shown on the *News24* website (of which some are listed below), is interpreted as a belief in a supernatural being; as a spiritual experience; as magic; as primitive superstition; as psychological projection; and as a structure and belief system through which society is oppressed. For example:

@Sharon Well said. Recognize that $E=MC^2$ is a pathetic troll with no original thoughts. Brainwashed into his beliefs he does not have the intelligence to reason, ask questions and see the world as it exists. That he believes in a book that has talking animals, wizards, witches, demons, sticks turning into snakes, food falling from the sky, people walking on water, zombies flying through the air and all sorts of magical, absurd and primitive stories exposes his narrow world view. (“Zaatheist”)

I stopped trying to force myself to believe the bible when I decided that hell cannot exist and therefore had no fear

for hypothetical damnation left to push me. No longer did I find it necessary to con myself into reading the bible out of fear and superstition. The entire story in the bible is based on the idea that we need to fear, and thus need to be saved from a place called hell, and is therefore based on irrational fear. Fear is a strong motivator though, irrational or not! ("Karien")

Who cares? Those of us who have compared the track records of religion and science in explaining the material world. Religion ... Saying magic spells creates light. Disease is caused by demon possessions. Prayer can move mountains. Witchcraft is real and you should burn old ladies. You can cram all the animals in the world onto a 300 cubit boat with all their food for a year ... ("Michael")

Religion is nothing else but a philosophy, a way of thinking, that's all there is to it ... Many clever ones who can think, saw it as a great business opportunity. That [is] how you see different churches based on different philosophies/religions growing in numbers ... and making very good money on narrow minded people who refuse to think for themselves. ("Maryla")

@jody begs. The proof for God's existence and the truth of His Word is all around us. If you choose not to believe in the evidence, He will provide a final proof when He comes back to earth for the final judgment. The problem is that everyone will believe in his existence on that day, but some will fall down in fear, knowing that their opportunity for repentance has passed. ("Johan Lombaard")

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this essay by qualifying that my concern with the article and reader comments outlined above does not emerge from a personal religious or non-religious conviction. In my personal capacity I support the teaching of evolution as scientific theory. I do not support the intimidation of any teacher, and in this case, any teacher who chooses to teach evolution as part of the science curriculum. The issue I have with the article and reader comments is thus not with the actual news story. In fact, I believe the story to be of utmost importance for public debate.

The concern I have is with the way the story has "gone public", the

subsequent “public” and “publicity” that it attracted, and the limited ways in which the term *religion* was used among the online “public”. I believe an injustice was done to a way of being in the world that is so much more complex than what was communicated in the article and by its commentators. I am frustrated and saddened by the impoverished and shallow way in which religion is portrayed in general in the news, not even to speak of the reader comments that the topic of religion and science commonly attracts. The reality, however, is that when it comes to media, and new media in particular, there is very little way of regulating or governing the ways in which religion enters and becomes understood in the public sphere. A normative view of the public sphere, however desirable, is not realistic.

Taking the online news article and reader comments analysed in this article as examples, I am inclined to agree with Habermas in his concerns regarding the media as public sphere. The public sphere as “manufactured” by the media is indeed wide, but in terms of public deliberation and use of reason, it is functionally insignificant. Instead of facilitating social change, the news seems to be widely received by consumers who reply publicly, but uncritically. In the news story and reader comments in question, critical and self-reflective voices are definitely lacking — voices that might very well be conversing in private, non-publicly, about this very important public issue.

Christopher Deacy, co-editor of *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, shares my concern about an apparently impoverished and incomplete public debate on religion. According to Deacy (2009: 1), writers such as Richard Dawkins have popularised a binary view of religion and science by perpetuating the view of science as the only “reliable path to knowledge, seen as objective, universal, rational and based on solid observational evidences”, and religion as “belonging to the realm of the emotional, irrational and the subjective”.

The treatment of religion by authors such as Dawkins tends to miss the point of where religious belief, expression and commitment tend to be located and can be encountered in contemporary society ... Religion is alive and well in the 21st century, but since it is not bound up with God, the Bible and the Church in quite the way Dawkins has in mind, the debate is too often incomplete and impoverished. (Deacy 2009: 7)

More often than not, religion does not enter the public sphere by way of religious or academic deliberation, and also not by way of one unified public. Instead, realistically speaking, religion enters the public sphere via platforms like online news media, at the fingertips of individuals who make

their private belief systems public. This is evident both in journalist Duncan Alfreds's framing of the article in question and in the 1110 reader comments. Furthermore, both the journalist and the commentators, more often than not, portray their private belief systems as representative of the public.

But still, why does it matter what people say about religion in the media, and why does it matter if the debate remains limited? Because, as Michael Strausberg (2009: 7) argues, these lay theories — what people say on the bus, what they read in the news, and what they comment online — are not only carriers of meaning, but carriers of reality. What we say constructs reality. What is said about religion is that which constructs religion. If religion is limited, if it is in conflict, and if it is static, that is unfortunately what it might become and appear to be in certain temporal moments.

What then is to be said about the grand promise of the vast and varied digital space that can contribute to re-imagining religion? Could the digital be the public sphere of the future that lives up to the normative promise of fluidity, true representation, and social change? Yes, maybe. I do, however, remain wary. People remain people, whether in mediated spaces, third spaces, or in-between spaces. Limited and contradictory views of the use and understanding of religion remain, and as Jonathan Z. Smith states, have existed since as far back as the sixteenth century. See for yourself. Just read the news — and do not forget to read those comments.

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