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Afterword: On the Study of Religion in Public Institutions

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Each of the essays presented enters the conversation about religion in public institutions through a different analytic doorway. The essays presented here enlarge and challenge various aspects of our initial analytic framework and enable us to see our blind spots and propose next steps. Reflecting on the contributions, we outline three additional issues to consider: the centrality of religion to the organizational identity or to organizational goal achievement, the effect of a specific aspect of the institution's organizational structure on religion, and the relevance of larger cross-national differences for explaining differences in the same institution across national borders. Finally, we call for additional cross-national case studies that will enable continued development of the comparative framework we propose.

Keywords: *religion, spirituality, comparative, cross-national, public institutions.*

INTRODUCTION

This symposium addressed a key gap in the literature: while there has been substantial growth in the number of independent case studies analyzing how religion and spirituality shape and are shaped by public institutions, cross-national and cross-sectorial comparisons in this area are still very rare. To foster this comparative perspective, we gathered leading scholars in the field and asked them to think through the analytical framework that we presented in the introduction. Each of the essays presented enters the conversation about religion in public institutions through a different analytic doorway. Considering the innumerable ways religion has been present and studied in military, penal, and health-care institutions, this is not surprising. Such different entry points in a single symposium reinforce, again, the challenges of bringing scholars writing on these topics into a common conversation, particularly one focused on consistent levels of analysis. Behind the entry points also lurk different concepts of religion and points of emphasis in these approaches. Thus, the results make clear not only the importance of engaging in cross-national conversations about these questions but tolerating different frameworks and working together through the additional insights that arise in these conversations. The essays presented here enlarge and challenge various aspects of our initial analytic framework and enable us to see our blind spots and propose next steps.

The essay by Idler and Kellehear considers the religious dimensions of organizations and proposes a typology to describe how involved religion is in an organization, with findings ranging from faith-saturated to faith-secular partnerships. They argue, in the process, that we must not

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lose sight of the religious history and character of the organizations in question, and that state policies, at least in the United States and the United Kingdom, do not explain as much variation as might be expected. Konieczny and Bertossi begin, instead, inside of military institutions to show how internal structures of these organizations—the chain of command in military contexts in particular—shape what counts as religion and how conflicts over those definitions are adjudicated and enacted. And Becci and Dubler focus on processes of religious pluralization, privatization, and individualization in prison systems in Europe and the United States to make an argument about how religion is used instrumentally in these contexts and how scholars need to know more about “religious gray zones” outside of formal chapel spaces.

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

Each essay addresses one piece of the three questions—descriptive, analytic, and methodological—we proposed in the introduction and touches on some analytic points of comparison we outlined. We reflect on three contextual questions our colleagues’ articles raised and then propose a way forward.

First, in thinking about religion in different sectors it is possible to focus the comparison on the broad question of how central or influential religion is in a specific institution or sector. The history of a sector and of the institutions within it, its current degree of privatization, and/or the range of issues people address in those institutions likely shape the degree to which institutions are permeated with religion. Yet, mirroring the approach taken by Idler and Kellehear to healthcare in military or prison contexts is not so easy since these sectors are much less privatized than the health-care sector. In cases where private-sector organizations run prisons (e.g., in the United States) or are involved in military missions abroad (e.g., in the U.S. military), these organizations are not defined by religion and must carry out a public mission that is not defined by religion either.

Thus, there may be important sector-specific differences in terms of the role that “faith-saturated organizations” (to follow Idler and Kellehear’s classification), i.e., organizations that have made the service to a specific religious community their central organizational goal, ever get to play. This said, it is likely nonetheless that public institutions, which usually fall either into the “secular” or the “secular with accommodation” category described by Idler and Kellehear, still differ in terms of how central religion is to the achievement of their institutional goals. Prisons certainly do not aim at only “serving” one religious community but Becci and Dubler explain that religion can contribute to achieving the goals of the prison as it is perceived to calm down and contribute to order and rehabilitation. The military as well may see religion as a contribution to institutional goal achievement to the extent that it helps soldiers dealing with combat stress. In this framework, one could also think of studies of the situations in the organizational practice when religion is used to achieve organizational goals. Thus, in encouraging social scientific comparisons, we do not want to lose the histories and specificities of sectors and institutions and see in those histories broad questions about the role of religion that should not be overlooked. This suggests the fostering of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of religion within public institutions that combine synchronic and diachronic or cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses.

Second, the comparison of institutions across national borders can focus on a specific aspect of the institution’s organizational structure and discuss how this structure affects religion. Bertossi and Konieczny identified the single chain of command in the military as an organizational specificity and give examples of how it has affected marginalized groups (Muslims and Freethinkers) in the French and U.S. armed forces. This approach implicitly or explicitly compares the military with organizations having a different or similar hierarchical structure. What the military examples provided by Bertossi and Konieczny seem to suggest is that mobilization and claims

making are particularly affected by the single military command structure because it functions like a one-shot try: a nonresolved claim goes all the way up to the hierarchical top and, if rejected, loses most of its legitimacy. For the opposite case of a claim being accommodated, one may expect the chain of command to work in a way that implementation is guaranteed. Here, however, Konieczny and Bertossi show that regulations governing religion in the military, just like in many other public contexts, are often decoupled from the real organizational practice. Konieczny and Bertossi's essay on the military, as well as Becci and Dubler's essay on prisons, thus show how formal policies around religion may be selectively read, interpreted, and applied, raising again the question of what factors explain this variation. Separating questions of policy from questions of practice requires different methods essential to understanding the lived experiences of actors in these settings. Likewise, it requires us to foster a dialogue between ethnographic researchers and legal and political science scholars to tease out how this dynamic unfolds.

A third type of comparison focuses on how the national environment influences the institutional practice toward religion. In this type of comparison, divergence and convergence would primarily be determined by cross-national differences or commonalities. In their comparison, Becci and Dubler stress commonalities between the United States and Europe and show how larger changes in the countries' religious demography have created concerns for the respect of religious pluralism that eventually also became relevant for prisons. Furthermore, the authors suggest that larger societal changes in terms of how the goals of imprisonment were defined had an impact on prisons and on how these institutions dealt with religious pluralism. In a more convergent perspective, Becci and Dubler establish comparability between the prisons in different countries by focusing on perceptions of the usefulness of religion. In their essay on the military, Konieczny and Bertossi also show the relevance of considering the national environment, and specific forms of state-church relations, to understand how religion operates in each national setting. More research is needed, however, to disentangle the factors that account for similarities and differences across countries, and to understand processes of convergence and divergence across sectors.

All three of these essays point to the intensely local nature of many of the institutions in question and lead us to strongly encourage more case studies—especially comparative case studies—in which authors consciously reflect on how they are asking questions about religion in public settings alongside the findings they present. While additional case studies do not guarantee similarities in levels of analysis, putting the analytic or methodological conversation alongside the empirical one might help refine the points of comparison we suggest and enable—with much more data—the creation of a typology that would facilitate greater generalization.

CONCLUSIONS

One way to look at the framework we developed in the introduction is to think of it as two-dimensional: the first dimension that we could call the “location of religion in the social field” captures the multiple levels of the social field where religion is at play as outlined in our introduction (i.e., institutional environments, the public institution itself, physical spaces, and individual actors). The second dimension describes the “concentration” of religion within that space and thus the strength of religion within those spaces—from weak or highly secular to strong and religion-saturated, to follow Idler and Kellehear. Most studies will likely use explanatory factors from the first dimension to explain the outcomes of religious practice and regulation of that practice on the second dimension. By isolating and comparing religion within discrete institutional spaces, such an approach might help to illuminate blind spots and clarify how religion and spirituality are understood, employed, and regulated within a spectrum of national public institutions across three distinct sectors. We believe this typology has merit as a starting point for

comparative analysis and hope colleagues will join with us in testing, expanding, and refining it with additional comparative case studies.

Of course, retrospectively, there are a few things in the analytical framework presented in the introduction that we would present differently after having read our colleagues' reactions. For one, the institutional environment obviously is more complex than we suggested in our outline since general societal changes in how to think about punishment, war, or healing may affect the institution so profoundly that it also affects the role of religion within that institution. Second, the public institution itself may need more attention and may also be a fruitful point for comparison, for example, regarding the institutional history and religion's role in that history or regarding the institution's formal hierarchical structure and decision-making procedures within that structure. Third, it may be no coincidence that none of the three contributions compared institutions and sectors on the level of individual actors or groups of actors. On this level, it may be very difficult to identify any national or institutional specificities about how religion is addressed.

Moving forward, we hope our framework and responses to it by our colleagues continue to enlarge cross-national comparisons about religion in public institutions in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and beyond. We encourage our colleagues to continue to ask how institutional environments (laws, regulations, politics), mission and policies, physical space, and actors as "independent variables" within public institutions that regulate organizational and religious practices as "dependent variables." Then, after knowing "where" and "in what capacity" religion shows up on the scene, we encourage asking the "how" and "in what concentration" questions about religion's presence. Consciously reflecting on how the questions asked shape findings and relate to other studies in this field might lead to a more general typology and greater cross-national scholarly understanding. We hope these essays have set the table for that conversation and many more colleagues join us as we have it.