Religion in Public Institutions: Comparative Perspectives from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe

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Much is known historically about the formal place for religion and spirituality in various countries. Less is known sociologically about the actual ways religion and spirituality are present in public institutions or about the conceptual and methodological assumptions that underlie how scholars approach the study of religion within public institutions. We conceive of public institutions broadly as those institutions that need to follow state regulations, are publicly accountable, and are supported (totally or partially) with state funds. We aim in this symposium to begin to develop a comparative analytical framework for analyzing ways religion and spirituality shape and are shaped by public institutions across three distinct sectors—hospitals, the military, and prisons—in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We outline three questions—the descriptive, the analytic, and the methodological—and suggest points of analytic comparison that might facilitate a systematic comparison of public institutions across several countries.

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

INTRODUCTION

Religion and spirituality are present in a range of public institutions in the United States and Europe. Varying forms of church-state relations shape their formal public presence, as do jurisdictional and demographic issues. Religion and spirituality also take on multiple, sometimes contradictory, roles and functions in the daily work of public institutions, ranging from medical to military to penal. Prayers open each session of Congress in the United States despite the formal institutional separation of church and state, for example, and several thousand federally paid chaplains serve people in federal prisons, the military, and veterans hospitals (Cadge, Clendenen, and Olson 2015; Sullivan 2014). In Europe, public schools in many countries offer religious education (Rothgangel, Jackson, and Jäggle 2014:7–9) and all public institutions, including prisons, the military, and state-run hospitals, must establish regulations for groups with special claims on diet, religious apparel, or prayer breaks (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Michalowski 2015).

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and spirituality are present in public institutions or about the conceptual and methodological assumptions that underlie how scholars approach the study of religion within public institutions. We aim in this symposium to begin to develop a comparative analytical framework for analyzing ways religion and spirituality shape and are shaped by public institutions across three distinct sectors—hospitals, the military, and prisons—in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

We conceive of public institutions in a broad sense in this symposium; that is, as those institutions that need to follow state regulations, are publicly accountable, and are supported (totally or partially) with state funds. Despite the wide variety of terms used in the scholarship to refer to these institutions (secular institutions, secular organizations, public institutions, secular public institutions, etc.), they all have in common that "it's through participating in the social life of these institutions that most residents and citizens encounter the 'state': as a regulator of citizenship, a provider of services, or a source of employment" (Bowen et al. 2014:3). Examining how such institutions conceive, handle, and manage religious and spiritual issues sheds light on how the religious and the secular are being negotiated and renegotiated in the public spaces of contemporary societies. Public institutions are crucial sites for observing the practical, social, and political implications of the transformation of religious-secular arrangements in contemporary societies as well as for examining how religious and spiritual fields and their boundaries are shaped and reshaped (Beckford 2012; Cadge and Konieczny 2014; Griera and Clot-Garrell 2015; McRoberts 2012). Due to their close connection to the state, public institutions are more likely than nongovernmental organizations to reflect national specificities of state-church relationship in their organizational structures when dealing with religion and spirituality. It is for this reason that public institutions are particularly interesting for the type of cross-national and multilevel comparison aimed at in this symposium. The central aim of this symposium is to scrutinize how different public-private arrangements and countries' historical trajectories affect the way religion and spirituality are being addressed in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. We intend this as a first step and hope to expand geographically in subsequent efforts.

We approach religion and spirituality broadly and inductively, considering what counts and is counted as religious or spiritual within the institutions and who is doing the counting. As Beckford (1999) and Beckford and Gilliat (1998) argue in their work on religion in prisons, it is not possible to take for granted how, and through which mechanisms, public institutions identify and conceptualize religion and spirituality. As Beckford (1999) explains, the examination of what counts as religion in each specific institutional context shows that defining religion in a certain way has concrete political consequences (and may affect the outcome of the research). Institutionally imposed definitions of religion and spirituality are dependent on contextual, social, and historical factors; we must take into account such definitions' contingent and shifting nature within institutional fields (Bender 2010; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Scholars utilizing lived religious approaches have explored how religion and spirituality operate outside of institutions and exert strong influences on people's values and behaviors (Ammerman 2006; Jeldtoft 2011; McGuire 2008), while other scholars have considered the role of organizational factors within religious organizations, the inverse of the question we are asking here (Demerath et al. 1998; Hall 1997; Lucken 2014).

Debates on the resurgent and fading roles of religion and spirituality in the public sphere have multiplied in recent years in the United States and Europe. The works of intellectuals such as Casanova (1994), Habermas (2006), Bellah et al. (1985), Berger (2014), Martin (1996), and Davie (2000) have increased social scientists' attention to these questions, as have a range of public events and political developments. While most contributions, especially initially, remained at an abstract and normative level, there is now a growing literature that empirically explores how current transformations of religious-secular dynamics crystallize in specific institutional domains and express distinct differences across the Atlantic.

While U.S. scholars take for granted the presence of religion in the American public sphere, the secularization thesis has lingered in Europe. An increasing Muslim presence in the European Union, paired with lower native birth rates and Christian church attendance across Europe, may be transforming the way social scientists understand how religion operates in the European contexts. Bruce (1996), for example, discusses situations when religion merges with ethnicity to drive social change. Hervieu-Léger (2015) points to the popularity of midnight mass in France and the public appeal of Christian weddings and royal christenings in the United Kingdom to illustrate the particularities of those who "belong but not believe" in Europe. In a similar vein, Davie (2000) shows how churches serve as important cultural institutions and notes, for instance, how Lutheran state churches in Northern Europe have high rates of membership (and state financial support) though practice is very low. Such instances of "vicarious religion" performed by the church on behalf of an increasingly secular majority illustrate a possible shift to the type of market-based religious economy witnessed in the United States (Davie 2006).

Rather recently, individual researchers on both sides of the Atlantic have "rediscovered" public institutions as a relevant venue for negotiations over religion and spirituality in public spaces. Over the past 10 years, this literature has grown considerably but scholarship remains divided by sector and by nation: most studies focus on single institutions such as hospitals, the military, prisons, airports, or schools in only one nation.[1] There is a general awareness of other institutions and nations but efforts to think across sectors are hampered by different research designs, varying units of analysis, and double variance. In terms of countries and institutions, scholars think differently about religion and/or spirituality and have different ideas about how to measure it. As a result, they may focus on specific religious groups, such as new religious movements on the one hand and Islam on the other, and identify distinctive ways in which religion manifests itself within public institutions. Different levels of analysis complicate the picture—some take an institutional point of view (regulations), while others look at how groups or individuals interact within institutions.

Some studies focus on chaplains, for example, while others consider chapels or prayer spaces as the focus of analysis. Some ask about how particular institutions accommodate minorities through regulations for religious apparel, prayer time, or dietary precepts. Still others consider religion/spirituality in the daily lives of people within specific public institutions. Some studies are richly descriptive, while others try to connect religion and spirituality as independent variables to aspects of institutional structures and related sorts of dependent variables. Some scholars are also starting to think about religion and spirituality as the dependent variable, aiming to explain the independent factors that lead it to take the forms it does. An additional challenge is that these studies are based on different types of data, ranging from notes on participant observation to qualitative interview data to document analyses of legal regulations and political debates.

This symposium proposes points of analytical comparison that might facilitate a systematic comparison of public institutions across several countries. With the inclusion of an increasing number of cases, such a comparative framework can help to identify the relevance of local-level orders and national-level arrangements of state-church relation as well as of institution-specific opportunity structures for religion and religious diversity (Michalowski 2015). In this symposium, we are approaching those public institutions marked by some degree of closure: hospitals, prisons, and the military. In such cases, users and clients of hospitals and prisons and the personnel of the military all have limited or no access to religious services in the outside world. Thus, even in countries that otherwise practice a strict separation of state and church, these public institutions employ chaplains to provide religious services and regulate the religious practice of their patients, prisoners, and military personnel in other ways.

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[1]A comprehensive bibliography is available at <http://religionpublicinstitutions.com/publications/>.

The existing research is mostly divided by the sector on which it focuses, making comparative analysis difficult. For instance, studies on the nexus of religion and health-care institutions generally aim sector- or nation-specific lenses on the subject and draw on different disciplinary methods. Although a long history of scholarship for and about chaplains exists (Carey and Davoren 2008; Swift 2015), it has little cross-over with social science or ways of thinking about religion's presence in health-care contexts beyond what chaplains do. Likewise, national contexts play important roles for obvious reasons of funding, cultural space, demographic profiles, and the ideology of specific state-religion relationships. While scholarship on chaplains flourishes in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, chaplaincy as a social phenomenon is less widespread in Europe and is therefore the subject of fewer scholarly studies. With regard to hospitals, studies show that state financing of healthcare, discrete national histories of chaplaincy, and ways of responding to religious diversity all make substantial differences for how religion and spirituality are addressed (Cadge 2012). Nonetheless, it is striking that there is a lot of research about *individuals*, including staff in health-care institutions, but quite a bit less theorizing about how health-care *institutions* respond as institutions when religion shows up within their domain. The question remains: How do we understand religion in public institutions such as healthcare considering national contexts?

Studies of religion and spirituality in the military are equally divided by country as well as by area of focus; there are only a few cross-national comparisons (Hassner 2014; Michalowski 2015; Soeters and van der Meulen 2007). In the U.S. context, a growing body of research describes the work of military chaplains and multiple memoirs show how their work is shaped by shifting policies and changing religious demographics (Autry 2006; Benimoff 2009; Bergen 2004; Cook 2005; Hansen 2012; Whitt 2014). At the individual level, scholars have explored religion in the lives of individual soldiers and the notion of spiritual fitness and its role in training and military preparedness (Hufford, Fritts, and Rhodes 2010; Mansfield 2005; Mansfield, Mitchell, and King 2002). While in many European countries the military has been neglected by sociologists of religion, a few studies have looked at identity negotiation and inclusion of soldiers practicing minority religions, particularly Islam (Bertossi 2014; Bosman 2008; Settoul 2008).

In similar ways, studies of religion in U.S. and European prisons chart the official presence of chaplains and the demographics of prisoners as well as their lived experiences of religion (Ajouaou and Bernts 2015; Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Chui and Cheng 2013; Dubler 2013; Hicks 2008; Khosrokhavar 2015; Pew Research Center 2012). Comparative work that thinks institutionally across administrative regions or nations is more limited (for noticeable exceptions, see Becci 2011; Becci and Roy 2015; Beckford, Joly, and Khosrokhavar 2005; Cairns 2015). Several studies examine frameworks regulating religion as a response to changes in the European religious landscape, such as secularization (Martínez-Ariño et al. 2015), the rise of religious minorities (Jahn 2015; Rostaing, Béraud, and Galembert 2015), and the growth of holistic spirituality (Griera 2017). However, most of these studies focus on the religious practices of inmates, and so may overlook the religious experiences of guards and other prison staff.

Currently, there is no comparative scholarly framework that can help scholars conceive of religion and spirituality across public institutions and across countries. We aim to foster more comparative thinking with the intention of building a conceptual framework that is sufficiently inclusive to be applied across different contexts but also specific enough to point to differences and commonalities across cases. We commence by organizing this symposium focused on three questions we see as essential to a comparative perspective:

(1) **The descriptive question**: How are religion and spirituality present in specific public institutions, such as healthcare, the military, and prisons, in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries? What do scholars see as religious or spiritual in these organizations, and where do they identify pieces of the organization where religion or spirituality are present?

(2) **The analytic question**: How do scholars understand how organizations respond to the presence of religion and spirituality in their midst? Which elements of their responses do they trace back to institution-specific requirements or culture? The local order? The national environment? Transnational networks?

(3) **The methodological and conceptual question**: How do scholars who are studying religion/spirituality in public institutions do so conceptually and methodologically? How do researchers define religion, how do they study the organizational context in which they study religion (and what do they include/exclude from the definitions), and how do such definitions affect the outcome of the research? What are the possible blind spots? (e.g., Why do we only study certain organizations/institutions? Why do we tend to focus only on certain groups of individuals within these institutions? Who is difficult to reach, and thus whose points of view are we missing?)

Based on the essays published in this symposium, we revisit these questions in a short afterword where we reflect on our initial analytical framework and, as outlined below, points of comparison or a set of analytical indicators that might help scholars think about religion and spirituality in intentional ways that cut across different national and organizational contexts and push existing research outside of its sector-specific foci.

Points of Comparison

As an initial approach, we propose the following points of analytical comparison, ranging from the macro to the micro:

(1) The Institutional Environment
- How do national regulations govern how religion is dealt with in specific institutional contexts?
- How do external political pressures influence how the public institution addresses religion?
- How do religious communities and other actors impact activities within this sector? Are these communities and actors religiously monolithic or diverse?

(2) The Public Institution Itself
- What kinds of policies do these institutions have about religion?
- What do we know about how these policies are enacted/not?
- What role does religion play in the achievement of institutional goals?
- Is this institution closed to the environment (i.e., a total institution) (Goffman 1961)?
- Whose religions does the public institution recognize and in what ways?
- What are the ideas, ideals, and ideologies that actors mobilize to explain and legitimize current arrangements? (For example, do people ever refer to larger ideas about how state and church should ideally interact in a specific national context?)

(3) Physical Space in the Institution
- Where within the physical space of this institution is religion visible? What does it look like?
- How are areas designated for spiritual or religious practice?
- Do religion and spirituality appear outside of these designated areas, and if so, can newcomers and established groups both modify physical spaces?

(4) The Actors
- Within the public institution, which actors regulate religion?
- Who are the beneficiaries of accommodation inside and outside of the institution? Are beneficiaries the ones who make the strongest claims about how to deal with religion and spirituality?

- Are the actors who work in religion and spirituality representatives of specific faith groups, or do they work interreligiously?

(5) Religious Practices and Their Regulation in a Specific Sector
  - Which religious or spiritual practices are present within this public institution?
  - Which religious or spiritual practices are restricted and how?
  - How are nonreligious persons served?
  - How are religious or spirituality majorities treated in comparison to minorities?

While none of the essays that follow addresses all five of these dimensions, we pose them as a point of departure to be refined and reconceptualized as this conversation continues. We privilege ethnographic and qualitatively oriented approaches in answering these questions because of the perspectives they can offer on daily life, although we aim to be methodologically pluralistic to develop the best possible analytical framework. Potentially, such an analytical framework (if sufficiently condensed) could also become relevant to more quantitatively oriented studies (Banting and Kymlicka 2012; Bjerre et al. 2015; Chaves and Cann 1992; Fox 2008; Koopmans, Michalowski, and Waibel 2012).

CONCLUSION

We came to this project through the Religion and Public Institutions Network that emerged in 2014. It was clear at that time, and in subsequent conversations, that a growing number of scholars are thinking about these questions—but their units of analysis and analytical approaches are disparate enough to result in limited opportunities for cross-national empirical comparison using existing data. In this symposium, we pair a U.S.-based researcher with a researcher based in the United Kingdom or the European Union with the aim of developing an empirical framework that allows scholars to compare within and across sectors, thus allowing for more fruitful empirical comparison and study in the future. Rather than asking each pair to prepare a short piece aimed at reviewing all the literature about their sector, we ask them to consider how religion/spirituality has and—more importantly—could be studied within it. We shared this introduction with them before they drafted their articles and drafted the short afterword after reflecting on their articles and perspectives. We hope this set of articles furthers thinking and comparative work not just in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe but globally.

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