

University of Groningen

Nothing Outside the Text? Religion and its Others in Emoji Discourse

McIvor, Méadhbh; Amesbury, Richard

Published in:
Bulletin for the Study of Religion

DOI:
[10.1558/bsor.34261](https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.34261)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
McIvor, M., & Amesbury, R. (2017). Nothing Outside the Text? Religion and its Others in Emoji Discourse. *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, 46(3-4), 64-65. <https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.34261>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Nothing Outside the Text? Religion and its Others in Emoji Discourse

Méadhbh McIvor
Assistant Professor of Religion, Law and Human Rights
University of Groningen
m.mcivor@rug.nl

Richard Amesbury
Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Clemson University
ramesb@clemson.edu
doi: 10.1558/bsor.34261

We are grateful to Joseph Laycock for his comments on “Emoji Dei,” and for offering a further example of the construction of religion in the digital age through his discussion of the “Cult of KEK.” In what follows, we hope to clarify some of the points we made in that piece, and to echo our invitation to scholars of religion to consider what insights might lie within their smartphones, tablets, and social media profiles.

Laycock identifies three agents with a putative interest in demarcating the boundaries of “religious” emoji: Rayouf Alhumedhi, the student behind the hijab emoji design; the Unicode Consortium, which approves and standardizes emoji across platforms; and scholars of religion such as ourselves, who choose to frame the headscarf emoji as a datum for the study of religion. While there are numerous individuals, groups, and entities that might be added to this list, we are keen to emphasize just one: the media, both “social” and in their more “traditional” forms (including *The Washington Post*, through which we were first made aware of Alhumedhi’s proposal). It is via these platforms that Alhumedhi has chosen to publicize her design, and it is through the resulting articles, blog posts, and hashtags that most smartphone users will learn of this particular addition to their emoji lexicons.¹ The media’s position, we argue, is one in which the hijab emoji is both explicitly marked and implicitly treated as an emblem of “religion.” It is this deployment of the category in popular culture that “Emoji Dei” seeks to explore.

In the piece, we refer to emoji that denote or connote religion in various ways, including images that function as metonymic representations of named

“religions”—the torii as a symbol of Shinto, say—and those that depict practices typically framed as “religious” in popular discourse, such as the praying hands. We are not claiming, however, that the hijab emoji—or its menorah, Kaaba, or Dharmachakra counterparts—is religious in any *essential* way. Rather, we are seeking to explore the ways in which the category of religion—a category which, genealogical critique notwithstanding, is already operative in the world (whether or not the word itself is deployed)—structures cultural phenomena, including new linguistic movements. Our intention is not to prescribe emoji orthodoxy but to shed light on the assumptions about religiosity already present in social media. Our explicit invocation of the category of religion is part of this exploration.

Laycock takes for granted that religion is a “second-order category,” a view he associates with the thought that “there is no inherent reason” why anything should be so labelled. In support of this view he cites J. Z. Smith’s famous remark that “religion” is “a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore theirs to define” (1998, 281). But these claims require qualification. Just as nothing is *inherently* religious, so too nothing is *inherently* a first- or second-order category. Because discourse about religion is an ordinary feature of language, the distinction between what is primary and what secondary is always relative to some particular analytic schema. In referring to religion as a second-order category, Laycock seems to be suggesting that it is only scholars of religion, and not the people they study, who use the term. But in fact the term circulates widely in contemporary culture, and not primarily as a result of the influence of religion scholars

(the cultural significance of which religion scholars are perhaps prone to overestimate).² As historical analysis has shown, “religion” has never been solely, or even primarily, the property of the scholar’s study. Of course, scholars are free to define it for their own purposes as they see fit. But it is important to appreciate that *religion*, while by no means natural, is a formation entrenched today in a variety of so-called “first-order” discourses, including media, law, and popular culture.

Moreover, while we accept that “religion” and “the secular” are mutually constitutive categories, our claim that emoji are expressive of a secular sensibility goes beyond this. As we have argued, a hijab emoji can be viewed as “secular” not merely because the category of religion always seems to invoke its Other, but because its very inclusion as an option frames religion as a particular kind of object. The secular, in this sense, is neither the inverse nor the absence of religion, but a *way of approaching and knowing the world*. This episteme functions as the horizon within which religion can be singled out as something distinctive and demarcatable, an object variously of celebration, anxiety, and study. “Religion” is a secular category.

Laycock raises a significant methodological question when he asks, “How are religion scholars to know who uses the headscarf emoji in their text communications and why?” It is true that a lone academic could not possibly hope to chart the myriad uses of the hijab emoji in a comprehensive sense (no matter how generous her data plan). But those trained in the ethnographic method are, we submit, likely to be privy to significant data already. After all, twenty-first century ethnography does not stop when one leaves the proverbial village square. We SMS and WhatsApp our interlocutors, and we follow them on Twitter and Facebook. In this sense, the data we are looking for are quite literally at our fingertips. Language is inherently public, and the language of emoji can be learned in the same way and to the same ex-

tent as any other language—through use.

As “Emoji Dei” points out, the hijab emoji—like all emoji—can be put to any number of uses. While Alhumedhi and her supporters view it as a sign of inclusion, there is no doubt that it will also be used for other ends. Indeed, this is already happening: in one particularly disturbing example, a GIF recently posted on Twitter (and tagged #hijabemoji) depicts the smiling, hijab-wearing icon adorned with a suicide vest, which explodes with a cartoonish BANG! As scholars of religion have long pointed out, efforts to isolate “real religion” from political contamination are ideological in and of themselves, failing, as they do, to acknowledge the messy, historically-constituted interactions that make up human experience. Religiously-inflected emoji present new opportunities for studying these interactions in the contemporary world, and it is for this reason, we submit, that scholars ought to become fluent in their use.

Notes

1. The #hijabemoji hashtag spiked in November 2016, when it was first confirmed that Alhumedhi’s design had been accepted by the Unicode Consortium. A similar bounce in hashtag traffic is expected after its introduction.

2. Of course, no such qualification is necessary in the case of pre-modern societies to which the concept is altogether foreign. As Brent Nongbri (2008, 447) has noted, “Religion cannot be a descriptive category for ancient cultures.”

References

- Nongbri, Brent. “Dislodging ‘Embedded’ Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope.” *Numen* 55 (2008): 440–60. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852708X310527>.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. “Religion, Religions, Religious.” In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, 269–84. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.