Researching Religion in Public Institutions: Context, Object, and Methods

Mar Griera
Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona
mariadelmar.griera@uab.cat

Julia Martínez-Ariño
Groningen University
j.martinez.arino@rug.nl

Abstract

The increasing vitality and variety of religious identities in Europe give rise to new claims and demands by religious minorities. This generates new challenges for the articulation of the religious and the secular in European democracies, which become especially salient in public institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and schools. This special issue focuses on public institutions with the aim to examine how state and religion encounter one another in contemporary Western societies. We take public institutions as privileged observatories for understanding the changing place of religion but also as laboratories in which new arrangements are experimented. The articles analyse the presence, regulation, and negotiation of religion and religious diversity in public institutions across Europe combining innovative empirical enquiries with theoretical and methodological reflections.

Keywords

religion – public institutions – religious minorities – secularisation – religious diversity

1 Introduction

The European religious landscape is rapidly changing. The growth in global migration flows has fostered religious diversification and transformation around
the continent. This takes place at the same time that the historical churches are losing ground and traditional religious identities are adopting new shapes and expressions. Furthermore, the astonishing popularity of holistic spirituality is redefining the contours of the religious field and making religious identities slippery for social research.

In this scenario, historical church-state patterns are proving to be ill suited to examine and explain the increasing myriad ways in which states interact with religions. As Rita Hermon-Belot and Sébastien Fath indicate, “the combination of deregulation and recomposition of the religious, characterised by the multiplication of micro-actors, has blurred the reference points, once well established, of the big religions, Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism, in dialogue with the state.” Thus, the historical semantics of the relationship between the state and religious groups are becoming outdated, and we witness the emergence of new actor constellations between public authorities and religious organisations. Likewise, the increasing vitality and variety of religious identities in European contexts give rise to the making of new claims and demands by religious minorities in the public sphere. This generates new challenges for the articulation of the religious and the secular in contemporary European democracies, which become especially visible and salient in public institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and schools.

This special issue focuses on public institutions with the aim to closely examine how state and religion encounter one another in contemporary Western societies. We take public institutions as privileged observatories for understanding the changing place of religion but also as laboratories in which new forms of interactions and arrangements are being experimented. The articles included in this special issue analyse the presence, regulation, and negotiation of religion and religious diversity in different public institutions across Europe.

This special issue originates from an international workshop held in Barcelona in 2014 in the framework of the research project “GEDIVER-IN: The Management of Religious Diversity in Hospitals and Prisons in Spain,” gathering outstanding academics researching the role of religion in public institutions in Northern, Central, and Southern European countries. All the articles combine innovative empirical enquiries with relevant theoretical and methodological reflections focused on prisons, hospitals, and schools. This publication contributes to the further advancement of the research in this field and speaks to existing debates on the analytical potential of looking at these institutional settings more closely.\(^5\)

2 The Context: Public Institutions

Research on the role of religion in public institutions has increased significantly over the last two decades. James Beckford and Sophie Gilliat-Ray pioneered the development of this research area with the publication of their research on prisons in the UK in 1998. Their book, *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society*, paved the way for subsequent research conducted in a number of public institutions, such as hospitals, schools, and the military and in several European countries. Beckford and Gilliat-Ray were among the first to show that public institutions are “[...] site[s] on which all the political challenges, conflicts and negotiations of a multicultural society can be observed in miniature, as [they] were.”\(^6\) Nowadays, there is a widespread consensus that public institutions are privileged vantage points to examine the transformations of the boundaries and dynamics between the religious and the secular.

Three main arguments justify the relevance of public institutions as privileged research sites to study contemporary dynamics of religious transformation and processes of negotiation between religious groups and the state. First, the diversification of the religious field, along with the secularisation of European societies, has had practical consequences for the functioning and performance of public institutions. The latter host increasingly diverse populations that have concrete religious and spiritual needs, which require specific

---


attention.\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, even though most of these institutions have gone through a substantial process of secularisation in most European countries, the role and position of the historical churches within most of these institutions is still relevant, preventing religious minorities from enjoying equal conditions.\textsuperscript{8} In some cases, the privileged position of Christian churches in public institutions fosters the emergence of public controversies that attract media and political attention. However, in most of the cases the power position of Christian churches vis-à-vis minorities remains invisible and embedded in the everyday life routines of the institutions and in their taken-for-granted dynamics. Mar Griera and Anna Clot-Garrell coined the term “Banal Catholicism” to refer precisely to how historical religious monopolies are still embedded in the sphere of the ‘normal,’ and thus their power is reproduced through institutional inertia.\textsuperscript{9} The power position of traditional churches is also reinforced by what Irene Becci calls the “institutional neutralisation of Christianity,” referring to the fact that traditional churches remain a kind of organisational reference for public actors who shape, more or less implicitly, newcomers’ religions according to a Christian conception. In this way, it is interesting to ask to what extent public institutions are places were transfers of practices from one religion to the other may happen. An example of this would be the creation of Muslim chaplaincies reproducing the idea and format of historical Christian chaplaincies.

Moreover, the emergence and increasing popularity of holistic spirituality fosters the blurring of the traditional boundaries between the religious and the secular. The growth of practices such as yoga, reiki, and meditation, in the context of public institutions leads to the emergence of “gray zones” (Becci in this issue) that fall outside of traditional notions of religion.\textsuperscript{10} Therefore, the growing complexity of the religious field becomes apparent in the daily functioning of public institutions and challenges the taken-for-granted ways of doing things in such contexts. All these reasons make it worthwhile to research how


particular secular institutions—such as hospitals, prisons, and schools—face and adapt to the changes in the religious field.

Second, as Wendy Cadge argues, focusing on public institutions allows us to study religion outside the traditional context of congregations. According to this North American scholar, secular organisations stand as crucial spaces for the analysis of all the intriguing issues related to the negotiation of religion and its boundaries in the public realm. In this regard, she states, “If we neglect these spaces and other places where religion insinuates itself into the interstices of what appear to be secular spaces, we run the risk of neglecting essential aspects of what religion is and how it manifests itself, perhaps according to revealing patterns, in different social places.” In other words, approaching the study of religion from the perspective of its presence and negotiation in public institutions provides new opportunities for looking at how religion changes and adapts to different social contexts. Moreover, by exploring religion beyond the walls of congregations, the increasing emergence of non-institutionalised expressions of religion becomes apparent. The proliferation of new spirituality in the prison context of various European countries is illustrative of this growing trend, as we already outlined.

Finally, following John R. Bowen and colleagues’ approach, public institutions are crucial insofar as “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.” Therefore, public institutions become ideal settings to trace processes of implementation of legal principles and to identify how broader political dynamics crystallise


in the everyday life of public institutions. Thus, this meso-level approach permits the uncovering of how religion and state interact with one another in concrete institutional settings, which helps overcome some of the shortcomings of the literature explaining the accommodation of religious diversity from a macro-level perspective. In addition, doing research in various institutional contexts enables the grasp of the local variations in the ways state secularism is implemented ‘on the ground,’ evidencing its malleability and internal complexity.\(^{14}\) Furthermore, studying the interface between the state and religious diversity provides a better understanding of the public imaginaries, discourses, and practices surrounding notions such as secularism, multiculturalism, and laïcité.\(^{15}\)

However, there are still some gaps in the literature dealing with religion in public institutions that should not be overlooked. To date there is no consensus around the definition of such institutions. What are public institutions? Are they those institutions that are publicly funded? Or those publicly regulated? Or those publicly owned? Or might it be that there is not a single definition and public institutions have to be defined by considering more than one variable or characteristic? Moreover, there are some authors that do not use the term ‘public institutions’ but that of ‘secular institutions’ or ‘secular organisations,’ adding more complexity to the field.\(^{16}\)

### 3 The Object: Religion

Religion is a complex phenomenon, and there is no consensus over definitions. As Beckford puts it, the meanings of religion are historically constructed.\(^{17}\) The question when doing research on religion and religious diversity in public institutions is, then, what is meant by religion and what is considered to be an expression of the religious. The politics of defining religion is not trivial and has relevant implications for the everyday life of people. Examining how

---

public institutions deal with religious issues reveals the processes whereby the state identifies, defines, and classifies religion. It also evidences the processes of legitimation and de-legitimation of certain religious groups over others. Comparisons across countries and institutions shed light on the shifting meaning of the term ‘religion.’ In this scenario, as highlighted by Gilliat-Ray in a public communication, gatekeepers and other actors that facilitate one’s access to the field as researcher are crucial. Their understanding of religion and religious diversity and of what they see as important things to look at influences the aspects researchers have access to and eventually the very definition of the situation in a particular institution. Moreover, the different actors involved in each institutional context may define what is religious and what belongs, for example, to the ‘cultural’ realm in quite differing terms. Thus, analysing religion and religious diversity in different institutions and in different countries can mean very different things and have important implications for the practice of the researcher.

There is also the need to consider epistemological concerns when investigating the presence and role of religion in public institutions. They are variegated and not restricted to definitions. The risk of overemphasising the importance of religion in social interactions would lead researchers to find religion all over the place. In a sense, there is the risk of imbuing religion and religious differences with more relevance than they actually have in particular contexts. Thus, religion should not be taken as the one and only starting point of any interaction, but rather the field should speak for itself.

Besides, the relevance of researching religion in public institutions lies on the questioning of what is specific to religion. Put differently, what is it that makes religion an autonomous sphere recognised as such? What does religion facilitate that the secular state cannot achieve itself? The question, then, is not only how the state defines ‘religion’ but also what the representations and expectations of the state towards religion are and what these tell us about the state itself.

4 The Methods: Focus, Objects, and Missing Pieces

Throughout Europe there is an increasing number of researchers interested in studying religion in public institutions. However, the focus of inquiry varies

18 Griera & Clot-Garrell, “Banal.”
substantially across studies. There are four areas of research that have been particularly fruitful. First, there is a relevant group of studies that focus on analysing the role of chaplains in public institutions and take them as ‘key informants.’\textsuperscript{20} This research accounts for the changing functions of chaplains in public institutions and their roles in acting as brokers or facilitators for the accommodation of religious diversity.\textsuperscript{21} Second, there are some (scarce) studies that focus on ‘secular’ professionals working on public institutions and their responses towards religion.\textsuperscript{22} This strand of inquiry analyses the role of staff usually in connexion with the institutional politics and policies of religion and religious diversity. Third, there are studies that focus on the ‘reception side,’ that is on the users of these institutions and on the way they perceive, act, and feel their religious belongings within the contours of the institution.\textsuperscript{23} Fourth, there is a growing field of research that, following the material turn in the social sciences, pays attention to the material and spatial aspects of religion in public institutions.\textsuperscript{24}

Challenges for advancing the field of research do not only arise due to the wide range of topics and analytical approaches adopted so far. The very

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
nature of public institutions raises more methodological concerns. The compartmentalisation of perspectives of the different actors interacting in public institutions obliges researchers to adopt a multi-method approach to better capture the nuances of the micro, meso, and macro transformations. While some studies have mostly adopted quantitative approaches based on survey research, the majority of studies in Europe have been done from a qualitative perspective. The latter have combined interviews with different actors—namely policy-makers and public officials, institutions’ staff and users, chaplains and other religious actors—with observations of the facilities and religious services. In some cases, the shadowing of individuals, mostly chaplains, has proven to be fruitful in capturing more subtle aspects. However, all these approaches gain in consistency when they incorporate a historical gaze that brings in the weight of well-established routines and behaviours as well as institutional constraints.

Some recurrent missing pieces have come up in academic discussions held in conferences and workshops over the last couple of years. First, there is an increasing acknowledgment that while research on religious diversity in public institutions has evolved and analytical approaches are increasingly being fine-tuned, systematic cross-country and cross-institution comparative research is still very scarce. In a special issue edited by Cadge, Griera, Kristen Lucken, and Ines Michalowski, and recently published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, the authors foster a European-US comparison and identify several analytical dimensions that may serve as a basis for future comparative research. However, at this moment, there are still very few cases of empirical studies comparing different institutional responses to diversity across countries and institutions. Thus, it is important to set the terms for

---


28 For across countries, see Becci, “Religion’s”; Ines Michalowski, “What Is at Stake When Muslims Join the Ranks? An International Comparison of Military Chaplaincy,” *Religion*,
future comparisons that will allow a deeper understanding of the specificities of each country as well as the common characteristics. This special issue attempts to further this research agenda by bringing in methodological reflections and comparative works, in a similar line as in the above-mentioned special issue by Cadge et al. Furthermore, more research is needed concerning the implications of everyday religious and spiritual practices for the functioning of public institutions. In this sense, research looking at the reconfiguration of roles of different professionals in light of the increasing diversification of the population could provide insights on how public institutions and its machinery evolve over time. Along these lines, there is also a lack of research on the actors (policy makers, religious leaders, and institutional staff) that emerge as key agents for the management of religion in these contexts. This would also speak to the sociology of professions.

5 The Contributions to this Special Issue

To different degrees, all the contributions to this special issue address some of the shortcomings mentioned above. The variety of original research pieces included in this special issue show the vitality of the research field as well as the need to keep the dialogue open. The special issue starts with an article by Becci, who offers an analytical proposition to study religious diversity in public institutions. Starting out from prisons, the author elaborates an analytical grid referring to three different analytical dimensions that go beyond the study of formal chaplaincy services. These are: (a) the symbolic dimension of institutions; (b) the people in the institution; and (c) the spatial and material aspects of institutions. Moreover, the author proposes the notion of “gray zones” to refer to those norms, people, and spaces that fall outside the dichotomy of the religious and the secular and that permeate the daily life of public institutions. Julia Martínez-Ariño and Griera, with their comparative study of the accommodation of religious diversity in prisons and hospitals in Spain, show the changing nature of the roles that Catholic chaplains are playing in public institutions. They highlight how contextual opportunities give rise to new roles that legitimate the persistence of the figure of the Catholic chaplain. Magdalena Nordin asks the question how healthcare givers in Sweden handle

religious issues and how patients wish they would be dealt with. Through the article, Nordin shows that hospitals do not have standardised protocols to deal with patients’ religious needs since religion is perceived to be a private matter and not the responsibility of hospitals. The special issue ends with an afterword by Gilliat-Ray, in which she further the analytical and methodological discussions on researching religion and religious diversity in public institutions and offers a critical and reflexive regard.

References


