

# Religious Diversity: First Reflections on Public Manifestations and Controversies

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**Abstract.** *The article presents a preliminary sketch of various approaches to religious diversity in contemporary societies. It argues that religious diversity is shaped by three important factors: the specific historical trajectory of a country's religious field, recent changes in the societies of the Global North through migration and the influx of "foreign" religions at an unprecedented scale, and the increasing relevance of the circulation of religious discourses and images in public life, especially through the media, for the perception of diversity. The article suggests paying special attention to the role of power relations in the wider society and to the impact of the state political framework in the analysis of the experience of and public debates about religious diversity.*

**Keywords:** *religion, diversity, media, public sphere, state.*

**Raktažodžiai:** *religija, įvairovė, medija, viešoji erdvė, valstybė.*

## Introduction

In this paper I summarize existing research and offer some general observations on analytical perspectives on the phenomenon of religious diversity. I will emphasize the need to study this issue in the context of the state and political power. For this reason, the paper will focus on the link between religious diversity and the fields of public communication and the anthropology of the state. The phrase religious diversity carries a double meaning of descriptiveness and normativity. Diversity in the religious realm is a normal condition for (almost) all contemporary societies, but at the same time it constitutes an element of the liberal ideal of the plural society. In real life, there is likely to be a discrepancy between the social reality of diversity and a political discourse of national, ethnic, or religious homogeneity which operates through linking one dominant type of religion to the hegemonic narrative of the state.

Looking at the analytical basis of diversity through the lens of the European case, three different aspects can be distinguished: history, migration, and

mediation. From a historical perspective, religious diversity is the outcome of population movements or shifts in religious affiliation over time that have shaped the religious field of a given society. Thus we find in post-Reformation Europe those countries that have throughout history been shaped by the dominant position of one strong church, such as Catholic-majority countries like Spain, Portugal, Italy, or France, Orthodox-majority countries like Greece or Russia, and Protestant-majority countries like the Netherlands or the Scandinavian countries. Then there are those with a – more or less even – balance between Catholicism and Protestantism like Germany and finally those countries that are home to a larger variety of religions which are neither dominant nor just tiny minorities – most of the Balkan countries or the Ukraine could serve as examples for this type. Short-term shifts due to wars (with the ensuing shifting of borders) or population relocations notwithstanding, these conditions have been comparatively stable across Europe since the 17th century.

Dramatic changes occurred with an unprecedented wave of migration after World War II. They affected all parts of Europe but have been especially salient in the countries of Western Europe (that is, west of the Iron Curtain) and today the presence of migrant religions has become one of the main characteristics of the religious field all across Europe (cf. Davie 2006). A first migration wave was caused by the need for labor in the expanding European economies, with migrant workers being recruited either from (former) colonies or, as in the case of Germany, from the Mediterranean fringe of Europe. Since the 1990s, global population movements triggered by various aspects of globalization, along with a need for expansion of the labor force in all European countries in response to a changing demographic profile brought about a second wave of immigration to Europe. Many of these new migrants were from Africa, Asia, and other parts of the Global South, trying to escape from economic hazards and regional conflicts. Many of them brought religions to Europe that were foreign to the host countries, most notably, Islam. The growing presence of new faiths has led to an increased awareness of diversity and alterity and has challenged widespread European notions about the relegation of religion to the private realm, to be kept separate from state affairs, the educational system, or public discourse. The different opinion of many migrant communities in this matter has reopened debates about the place of religion in public life, which have become manifest in controversies about material issues (religious buildings, veiling) and in debates about tolerance concerning the publicizing of view of religious issues that the majority commonly finds offensive. The lack of mutual comprehension and the clash of interests have led to dangerous confrontations – state sanctions directed at certain minority religious manifestations, on the one side, and religious radicalism, on the other.

Finally, media and media practices are a generative force in producing diversity. At the current historical juncture, cultural diversity of any kind must be seen as mediated, as strongly influenced by de-localized processes of the

production, circulation, representation and reception of meaning (cf. Eisenlohr 2012). Eisenlohr distinguishes between three interrelated key issues in this process: firstly, the control over the representations of diversity and difference (e. g., the production of negative stereotypes about religious others). Public representations of religious difference themselves may actively shape situations of conflict between groups set off from each other by religious boundaries, by intensifying the othering conducted along such lines. Secondly, they concern issues of censorship, of the silencing or repression of particular representations of religious alterity, and thirdly, the “cultural regulation” (cf. Kaur & Mazzarella 2009) of religious diversity through the reproduction and publicization of ethical and normative discourses.

So, how should religious diversity be approached analytically? It is important to be aware that neither diversity nor religion must be reified as a “thing” that can be studied outside of the context of other social manifestations. In his survey of the issue, Steven Vertovec has started by offering a broad definition of diversity: it is a social organization and different principles by which people, from context to context, situation to situation, mark themselves and others as different (Vertovec 2009, 9). His approach has been influenced by the analytical strategy of the Manchester School which distinguished between three levels in the interaction of specific “social situations” with a social order: a set of events or actual activities, a situation, i. e., the meaning actors attribute to their activities, and the setting, the structural context in which events occur. Building on this methodological background, Vertovec suggests three domains of the analysis of diversity:

- 1) configurations of diversity – the investigation of how diversity appears in structural and demographic conditions (categories, statistics, etc.) and in political-economic opportunity articulations (opportunity structures, social stratification and segregation, economic niches, etc.)
- 2) representations of diversity – the investigation of how diversity is imagined, by looking at images, representations, symbols, and meanings. In a way, all of the above categories can be seen as social constructions, as representations of reality that become reified through quantitative data, policies, or public debates. Therefore it is important to distinguish between dominant policy models and popular models, which are shaped by social psychology, memory, folk narratives, and the like. All representations happen in public space, e. g. in political discourse, political campaigns, policy documents, or opinion polls or in the media
- 3) encounters of diversity – the investigation of how diversity is actually experienced or encountered, how boundaries are made or maintained, and identities produced, maintained, changed, or creolized. There are a number of realms where such encounters take place: everyday practices, language and social practice, conflicts, intercultural programs for the celebration of diversity, material culture, architecture, food, etc.

One important conclusion that can be drawn from Vertovec's summary treatment is that diversity must be approached from the perspectives of emics and etics, of operational variables and subjective experience, which, as emics and etics can be expected to, sometimes coincide but usually are by no means congruent.

Religious diversity manifests itself especially in the public sphere (Habermas 1989), or, in a more anthropological vein, in public life (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002). Highly visible forms of religious activities in the contemporary world rely on techniques of mobilization common to modern public spheres in general. Anthropological studies in particular have demonstrated the blurred boundaries between religion, advertisement, and entertainment in contemporary publics (Meyer 2005, Meyer and Moors 2006). Such perceived links between religion and means of public representation raise the issue of the dominance of a few politically, and thus mediatically, powerful religious traditions in global public spheres, especially Evangelical Christianity and Islam. Their dominant position in mediascapes is likely to compel others to conform to those powerful practices, genres, and forms of public representation.

## Religion in the Public Sphere

Much social-scientific research on public spheres has been organized around the key dichotomy of access and exclusion, the relationship between the dialogic and disciplinary dimensions of the public circulation of discourse and images. The notion of dialogue has been taken to be one of the hallmarks of pluralism and public deliberation in the Habermasian tradition, which calls for religious dialogue. In practice, ethnographic studies have pointed to the complicated nature of dialogue which rarely implies the actual equal recognition of the other. Deliberation and dialogue have been observed to be interdependent with the disciplinary character of the public circulation of religious discourse and images. Hirschkind's often cited study on listening to cassette sermons among Muslims in Cairo (Hirschkind 2006), for example, shows that this practice operates as a technique of the self, supporting a striving for greater piety, while simultaneously constituting a sphere of deliberation and dialogue.

The rapid and far-reaching circulation of religious discourse and images in contemporary public spheres is also inextricably linked with the commodification of religion, commonly expressed through the metaphor of the "religious marketplace" (cf. Stark and Finke 2000, Stolz 2007). Social-scientific research has documented how market pressure privileges mainstream religious preferences in public sphere. It has portrayed individuals as postmodern religious consumers who tend to choose among a broad range of religious options appealingly packaged through marketing strategies and instantly available through digital technologies. This form of religious consumption becomes

especially apparent with regard to highly individualized and also relatively privatized religious orientations like New Age. It also highlights the aptitude of particular religious entrepreneurs to retail their traditions successfully in a highly competitive market of religious possibilities. As controversial as many of the theorizations of the religious marketplace are (cf. Bruce 1999), they highlight the important notion that religious affiliation must be approached as an option under conditions of contemporary cultures of public dissemination. The problematic of religious diversity thus becomes linked to the principles of capitalist competition and consumer choice. In some instances, market-driven preponderance of some religious images and discourses over others can enter into conflict with other, state-sanctioned regimes of religious diversity.

The problematic of access and exclusion in debates about the Habermasian concept of the public sphere has long raised the question of counterpublics (cf. Asen and Brouwer 2001), which have also emerged as a significant theme in the study of religious diversity. Counterpublics address their participants as inhabiting particular social locations rather than aiming for the general public at large. They are mostly linked to alternative means of dissemination, thus largely evading the control of the state or dominant religious institutions. Nonetheless, the governance of religion by the state, along with its normative models of religious diversity, remains supremely important for shaping the circulation of religious discourse and images. States play an important role in channeling the access of religious actors to the mass-mediated dimension of the public sphere and state censorship efforts are joined by middle-class moralities, published aesthetics and sensibilities in suppressing expressions of religions considered to be “amoral” or “revolting”. Research on public expressions of religious diversity has so far demonstrated that the boundary between the religious and the secular, as well as between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” expressions of religiosity often depends on the modalities of public perceptibility rather than on preexisting doctrines or beliefs.

This leads to the crucial role of power in the study of religious diversity (cf. Repstad 2012). Religious diversity represents a playing field with certain rules and with players who have – often vastly – unequal access to power in society. Power may enter the religious realm in two basic ways: as structural power (relating both to the framework of the state and to class distinctions within society) and through the agency of different religious actors struggling against each other over domination in society. Religious power is exercised most efficiently when intertwined with other kinds of social power, be they based on differences in interest in terms of class or nation or ethnicity. In liberal, democratic societies religious power is only to a limited degree based on the use of coercive force but to a much greater extent on authority, that is, on the ability of certain social actors to establish religion-derived norms that people observe. In popular opinion, religion tends to be accorded the ability to trigger violent antagonisms, but throughout recent history there has been little

evidence to support this assumption. In the most recent European example of war in Yugoslavia and its successor states during the early 1990s, religion and nationality were in fact rather instrumentalized as powerful collective identifications in a legitimizing discourse authorized by political elites with the aim of rallying people around a perceived common cause in a conflict that was essentially about political-economic issues (Halpern and Kideckel 2000).

## Analytical Approaches: Some Examples

Social scientists have invoked a number of conceptual approaches in their efforts to explain the power dimension of struggles whose goals were expressed in the idiom of religion. In an often-cited article, sociologist James A. Beckford (1983), for example, identifies several manifestations through which power may enter the religious realm. His typology includes “power which confounds”, which is seen as more of a potential than a fixed attribute, “power which convinces”, which refers to the ability of agenda-setting, especially through the use of religious language, “power which contests” civil power, “power which controls” through the establishment of binding moral norms, “power which cultivates, which empowers individuals in their efforts to achieve things easier than by other means, and “power which cures” illness and serves to attain a balance of good and evil.

In a much more concretely political reading of religious power, Dutch anthropologist Mart Bax (1991) introduced the concept of the religious regime, “a formalized and institutionalized constellation of human interdependencies of variable strength, which is legitimized by religious ideas and propagated by religious specialists” (1991, 9). Religious affiliations, Bax suggests, should be analyzed as political power constellations and their confrontation as implying the formulation of ideologies and the working out of tactics and strategies of how to win encounters and confrontations. In the end, there is a competition between religious regimes and with states over the monopolization of spheres of life. The specific constellations of a religious field would then be the outcome of such political struggles in which one religion wins and others lose and are marginalized.

The most widely known interpretation of religion in terms of social power comes from Pierre Bourdieu who sees religion as consecrating social distinctions and reproducing social domination (Bourdieu 1991a, 1991b, 1993; Rey 2007). In Bourdieu’s view religion helps to explain why the order of the world is accepted as we find it. A church’s primary intent is gaining the monopoly over the legitimate production of religious capital and the institutionalization of its dominance in the religious field. Religion thus is a key source for the legitimization of wealth and power in society, but at the same time, it serves as an idiom for the underclass to make sense of their position in society by

creating the misrecognition of the arbitrariness of the categories and social relationships that uphold the societal status quo. In other words, religion provides a framework of discourse and symbols that orders power relation in society as a whole and, at the same time, renders the condition of society meaningful by reproducing the individual agent's habitus through determining her/his tastes, needs, interests and appreciation of different kinds of capital.

In Bourdieu's overarching approach to a social theory of societal domination and acquiescence, he sees power as only rarely exercised through the use of overt physical force. Rather, social order is upheld through indirect, cultural mechanisms, paramount among them what Bourdieu call "symbolic violence". Richard Jenkins (1992, 104) succinctly summarizes this concept as follows: "Symbolic violence is the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i. e., culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate." In the religious field, symbolic violence is mainly committed by religious specialists in collusion with political and economic elites of the state. All of these parties work together in promoting religious orthodoxy, since the moral and symbolic domination of one church is by necessity supportive of the elites exploits in the economic, political, and cultural fields. The struggle in the religious field is carried out mainly between what Bourdieu calls the orthodoxy (that is, the dominant church) and the heresiarch (that is, any other religious tradition) in the orthodoxy's quest to monopolize religious capital. In terms of religious diversity, Bourdieu's approach explains the religious field with reference to the workings of power, as structured by relations of domination and subservience and never as a pluralism of equal, no matter how diverse it may be.

In a recent book, Bruce Kapferer and his collaborators (Kapferer et al. 2010) has expanded a similarly political understanding of religious power to a global perspective. In the introduction, Kapferer explains:

"There seems to be a link between what appears to be the "return of the religious" and reconfigurations of political and social realities attendant on what is loosely referred to as globalization. That is, the increasing power of religion in the framing, organization and motivation for social and political action may be associated with the break-up and fragmentation of formerly dominant socio-political orders and the social dislocations, redistribution and movement of populations brought about by such developments" (Kapferer et al. 2010, 2).

Kapferer and his collaborators see religious domains as the space par excellence of the creative and experimental imaginary of human beings upon their existential realities. As the latter change, the religious becomes a major site of often radical social and political experimentation. In an argument reminiscent of Bax's concept of the religious regime mentioned above, the authors argue for an understanding of religion in the contemporary world that sees it embroiled in struggles over symbolic, cultural, and social hegemony with secular powers,

especially the state, which in the times of neoliberalism and market rationality has retreated from many social and ideological spheres which now are open for the taking by religious agents. As Jean Comaroff (2010, 28) states: “Neo-conservative and revitalized religious creeds have energetically seized the ground once held by a discredited humanist ethics. In an age of receding sovereignty, they offer moral certitudes and ultimate accountability.”

All of the examples of systematic reflection on religion and power presented above cast doubt on the possibility of seeing religion and the socio-political processes taking place in the religious sphere as autonomous from either the wider force fields of a society or the encompassing structural constraints of the state. Religious diversity cannot therefore be assumed to have any social consequences by itself but only in interrelationship with wider political trajectories. In order to illustrate this statement, I will briefly introduce three examples of recent studies. The first concerns the representations of Muslims in the public sphere of Norway (Bangstad 2013). The study explores the role of power relations and the outcomes of inequalities in the access to the means of public representation as structuring effects of mediated debates about Islam and Muslims. Central to the contemporary framing of the issue is the distinction between the “good” and the “bad” Muslim subject. The former is regularly provided media access by liberal media editors in order to voice an immanent critique of Islam or of the other, bad Muslim, who only appears in a passive role as the radical, fundamentalist other. Far from providing a dominance-free dialogue in a Habermasian sense that gives equal voice to various representatives of religious diversity, the very framing of access to the mediated public sphere serve to reproduce the socio-political conditions of marginalization encountered by Muslims throughout society. The public sphere is thus not a field where religious diversity can be freely and openly expressed – not even in a notoriously liberal society like Norway – but rather an arena where certain religious expressions are excluded or marginalized, while the virtues of other, more socially conformist ones, are extolled. The affects of this layering of access to public representation can be seen especially under the conditions of recent religious diversity introduced by Muslim migrants.

The second example concerns religious pluralism in Catholic Italy (Pace 2013). The study focuses on social changes taking place in a society under a historic Catholic monopoly in the face of an unprecedented religious diversity. Today Italy can no longer be considered a Catholic country in terms of many Italians’ beliefs and practices, but a collective symbolism of a unified Catholic identity still remains powerful. In recent decades the country has faced an increasing influx of new immigrant religions. Islam and African Neo-Pentecostal churches predominate, but there has also been an increase of Orthodox churches from Eastern Europe. Immigrant churches are spread across the country but mainly concentrated in the industrialized north. The Italian Catholic Church has to cope with changes that are unique in its history. In



public debates, it strives to appear tolerant and open to dialogue while still maintaining the image of being the dominant actor in the religious field and setting the terms of a dominant discourse on matters of faith. In practice there are differences in the way it communicates with the immigrant churches, considering the Orthodox churches to be fairly acceptable but maintaining a cautious distance especially in its dealing with Islam.

The third study investigates the interplay of state, the Catholic Church and the expanding religious market in the management of diversity in Argentina (Frigerio 2012). The recent religious diversity in Argentina concerns mainly Evangelical Protestantism and Brazilian Umbanda. Despite the liberal-democratic framework of public discourse, these two have been subject to various strategies of regulation and exclusion, since religious diversity became possible with the deregulation of the religious market at the end of military dictatorship in 1983. Only then did various kinds of new religions become visible in the public sphere. Frigerio distinguishes between two main strategies of managing diversity: state management, which is effected through the legal and administrative system and – what he considers more important – social management, the deployment of certain tropes in public discourse to exclude new religions. During the first decade of publicly visible religious diversity, there were several waves of public outrage over it, first lamenting an invasion of foreign sects that were most likely financed by US imperialism, later introducing the trope of brainwashing, and finally raising a moral panic about scandalous accusation against sects, like child murders. Since the mid-1990s the new religious communities have been increasingly able to present their own view in the public sphere and have become less and less noteworthy for the media. Still they are considered to be somewhat suspicious and seen as less legitimate kinds of faith than the Catholic Church.

## Bringing in the State

As the random selection of examples of public debates about religious diversity shows, the perception of the latter is, first of all, always connected to images and discourses in the public sphere, especially through the media; moreover, the cases illustrate the relevance of time and the role of the state. Apparently religious diversity needs time to evolve in order to gain acceptance in a society. Long-term minorities tend to be perceived as less of a threat than recent ones which cannot easily be incorporated into a stable, familiar religious field. Such a status quo of religious relationships may well encompass vast inequalities but only rarely violent confrontations.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the role of the state, there appears to be a correlation between features of the contemporary state and the way religious diversity is organized.

<sup>1</sup> There is the obvious exception of the European Jews.

Studies on the sharing of religious sites and overlapping religious spaces in the Mediterranean region, an area long shaped by intersecting realms of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, illustrate the *longue durée* of religious interrelations (cf. Albera and Couroucli 2012, Bowman 2012, Hayden 2002, Hayden and Walker 2013, Hayden et al. 2011). These studies document the existence of mutualistic relations negotiated over time which have in some cases led to syncretic combinations of religious practices, even it may not be possible to speak of truly egalitarian relationships. Intersecting religious spaces have been inherently fluid, while people and their religious practices and topographies move across space. Shared religious spaces therefore shift in scale, over time, and in the context of the moving frontiers of different religions in regions that are diverse in terms of ethnicity and faith, expressing renegotiations of relations that oscillate between tolerance and antagonism through time.

The modern state has reified such fluid, negotiable relations through the working of bureaucracy and the law, establishing hierarchies of churches and interweaving majoritarian faiths with ideologies of nationalism and the interest of the state. The specific condition of religious diversity in a society is largely determined by a complex dialectic of state intervention and non-intervention (Fournier 2013). Either way, the liberal rationale of religion as pure individual identity situated outside the frameworks of power and politics fails to adequately describe the intertwining of religion and power in society. Even when the state confines itself to the role of neutral arbiter who creates and upholds legal regulations that are intended to organize a peaceful coexistence of various religions and communities, individual religious expressions are regulated by private ideological apparatuses that are the outcome of complex processes of knowledge creation and open to manipulation by various groups of stakeholders both inside and outside of the religious community. As Fournier concludes with regard to headscarf and burqa controversies in liberal Western societies, “The veil emerges as a multifaceted instrument of power that cannot be reduced to mere religious belief” (2013, 697).

In her study of politics in Turkey, Navaro-Yashin defines public life as “a site for the generation of the political, against the grain of such analytical categories like ‘the public sphere,’ ‘public culture,’ ‘civil society,’ and ‘the state,’ all frameworks that, in different ways, assume a distinction between domains of ‘power’ and ‘resistance;’... a precarious political arena where it is the public that produces and recasts the political” (2002, 2). Religious diversity needs to be sited in this fluid realm between the political and the affective. In reflections on the position of the religious within the contextual framework of the state one should avoid privileging institutional forms – as many social-scientific studies of the political have done – over the acknowledgement of a particular and historically specific imaginary about power and proper social relations. In an age of the ever-increasing publicness of everything, it is hard to imagine religion as the last residue of the private, even if religious practitioners would wish

that it were the case. No analytical approach to religious diversity, therefore, can avoid addressing faith and religious identification in the context of a public discourse – material, immediate, or mediated – that takes place in a public arena organized in terms of hegemonic power relations.

## Final Thoughts

A slippery subject like religious diversity defies an easy summary. It is first of all, as noted above, a normal condition of all contemporary societies and for that reason difficult to pin down as a concrete research topic or specific research tradition. Moreover, the topic of religious diversity is prone to luring researchers into the trap of quantitative description rather than rigorous analysis, of identifying a certain high or low degree of diversity and of its social acceptance in a society and considering the job done, instead of identifying those socio-political forces and interests that seek to maintain and reduce the level of diversity in the religious field. And finally, the concept of religious diversity is dangerously close to normative notions of pluralism as a desirable element of a Western-model liberal-democratic society – a view that ignores the possibility of different understandings in other socio-historical environments.

In closing, I would therefore like to suggest, rather than reifying religious diversity as a condition, an analytical “thing”, to focus on those discourses, folk concepts, and political ideologies that invoke the notion of religious diversity and explain their historical trajectories and contemporary struggles with conflicting ideas of how the relationship of society and religion should be conceived.

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## Religinė įvairovė: svarstymai apie viešą raišką ir kontroversijas

### Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojami įvairūs moksliniai požiūriai į religinę įvairovę šiuolaikinėse visuomenėse. Autorius teigia, kad religinę įvairovę formuoja trys pagrindiniai veiksniai: konkrečios valstybės istorinės trajektorijos, pokyčiai globalios šiaurės visuomenėse dėl migracijos ir precedento neturinčio „užsienio“ religijų antplūdžio, taip pat didėjantis religinių diskursų ir vaizdų viešajame gyvenime, ypač per žiniasklaidą, įvairovės suvokimas. Autoriaus nuomone, analizuojant religinę įvairovę ir viešuosius debatus itin svarbu atkreipti dėmesį į galios santykių vaidmenį platesnėje visuomenėje ir valstybės politinę sistemą.