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Editorial

Public Religions and Value Creation

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1. Between the Limelight and Backstage

Religions are gaining increasing visibility in the public space. Not so much (or not only) where one might expect to find them, namely within typically religious contexts and channels, but where we are no longer used to their presence, for example, in means of mass communication and advertising, as well as other sectors, from politics through the cultural industry and art to fashion, where today seeing references to the religious sphere is considered—by the vast majority at least—a brand-new thing (see, for example, Cohen and Hetsroni 2020; Knott et al. 2013; Lövheim and Linderman 2015; Mallia 2009; Nardella 2012; Neal 2019).

At present, this new visibility of religions is taking on multiple forms and contents as they lose their traditional ties with the field of religious specialists to enter the public space of the media, where they are acquiring a new role of growing importance. Often this happens in a substantially peaceful way, but it can sometimes give rise to tensions. When this occurs, they tend to emerge as highly conflictual. In peaceful circumstances, the use of religious references can appear as simply a curious and all in all marginal phenomenon, even though in reality it is not. Indeed, it is an empirical indicator of a transformation in which the symbolic dimension is acquiring increasing importance for collective subjects outside the religious sphere. Instead, in conflictual circumstances, the use of religion becomes an object of public debate, sparking controversies about the symbols, how they are produced and how they are managed. However, what is actually at stake is the collective consensus historically built up around them (Nardella et al. 2023). Moreover, whether absent or present, one can never take it for granted that controversies will not arise; these two conditions often alternate during the course of the same case, quickly intensifying or suddenly becoming silent once more, hardly ever going from one to the other and remaining that way.

A central point in this general framework is that today, religions are in the limelight because they have somehow become "useful" to the social actors who exploit them, insofar as they are able to offer these actors symbolic resources functional to building socially shared representations that are, at least in part, already accepted at the collective level from the outset. For example, representations of real or imagined communities celebrated during election campaigns and political demonstrations; branded worlds conveyed through logos and business sponsorships; and cultural traditions attributed to institutional spaces and public places. They are representations that incorporate the symbolic potential of the religious references employed to build them, thereby transforming into tools of identification and social distinction, and hence of belonging, for the users to whom they are proposed. As a result, they grant recognition from the users (or from those of them who accept these representations as valid) to their producers. This is not without consequences for the religious symbols and, inevitably, for the field in which they were historically produced and maintained over time, since their original collocation gets pushed into the background

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Received: 26 December 2024
Accepted: 31 December 2024
Published: 4 January 2025

Citation: Nardella, Carlo. 2025. Public Religions and Value Creation. *Religions* 16: 41. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010041

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(Gauchet 2004) and the religious contents end up acting as the symbolic and interpretative backdrop used instrumentally as an identity-asserting tool that can open up possible experiences and actions in those who latch on.

The research problem at the basis of this Special Issue, "The Valorization of Religion by Media", focuses precisely on this particular aspect of the entrance of religions into the limelight, which, as we have just seen, somehow at the same time implies their withdrawal from it. We have pinpointed three prime points of this complex situation to focus on: the symbols and the images with strictly religious meanings used to produce new symbols in various fields; the social actors who draw advantage from the encroachment into these fields; and the tensions that this introduces and the outcomes that emerge. The main social sectors in which the analyses presented herein have been conducted include marketing, understood generically as the cultural and communication system pertaining to the economic field, and journalism, as well as the technology—in particular, digital communication technologies—sector.

The role of the media in these three spheres is of interest in all of the cases investigated, which nevertheless differ in terms of the type of religious references borrowed and the goals for which they are used. Indeed, they are and at length have been the effective "place" (that is, the true public space) where these transformations take place and become visible to all (Herbert 2011; Hjarvard 2016), that is, where symbols and images with a religious meaning are reframed according to specific registers and narratives that no longer exclusively respond to the codes and control of the field of religion. Another point that can be useful to underline in this connection is that the media appear not only as the arena or "battlefield" (Foret 2015, p. 219 ff.) where various social actors come into competition to take possession of the religious symbology and the consensus that has built up around it (Nardella et al. 2023, p. 45 ff.) but also as a space where the same religious institutions are forced to move so that they can carry on existing, and come to terms with modernity (Guizzardi 1989; Hoover 2006). This has important effects on how these institutions construct their religious message, which today has to pass through the media and finds itself having to respond not only to the logics of the religious field but also to those guiding the media (Lundby 2018).

From this perspective, we have added another case to the ones under analysis, variously situated along the line of development of the general phenomenon of the use of religious references by non-religious actors. Located on the same line, but in the opposite direction, the extra case is linked to the converse phenomenon of religious institutions using their symbolic heritage to make themselves visible to the public on the lay media by attempting to follow, at times running enormous risks, as yet untrodden paths. The case in question is the Pope's blessing in an empty Saint Peter's Square broadcast around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. New Persistencies

The implications of the shift making religions visible as symbolic and interpretative systems, transformed in many different ways, are much wider than those indicated hitherto and link up to some far-reaching, long-term macro-social processes. One of these is the process that some scholars call "secularization", which indicates a generalized loss of followers and overall relevance on the part of religion in society, as it ceases to act as a recognized source for individual and collective choices and behaviors (Berger 1967; Dobbelaere 2002; Stolz 2020). In this frame, we will focus on a basic hypothesis to account for the persistence of religions in the public sphere that we are looking at here: it is precisely in the light of the secularization underway that it becomes possible to explain the persistence of religions in the public sphere in the form of communicative resources useable by various actors to pursue their own ends. In other words, it is not in contradiction with but precisely

owing to the reduction in their "social weight" that today religious traditions have come to find themselves publicly at the forefront, with—note—a substantially different role from the one they had before. No longer are they symbolic universes administered by bodies of religious specialists capable of steering individuals' overall interpretation of the world and their action in it but depositories of signs and meanings that can be dipped into at will in different social fields from the religious one, with functions (in a strictly sociological sense) responding to the need to strengthen those same fields. How? By building consensus around particular interpretations of reality through the use of religious symbology in their communication, according to needs, to include or exclude (think of the use of Islam in politics), to create followers, to revive or modify shared memories, or more simply to attract attention. And we must not forget that it is from these actual, socially used, and accepted applications that religious traditions today draw legitimacy as "trade goods" in terms of social consensus and acceptance and cultural hegemony.

This opens up a central point concerning the primary tools that make all of this possible, in other words, religious symbols. Owing to these new uses, they do not remain confined within the perimeter of the religious field but are transferred, whole or in part, inside the boundaries of other sectors of society where—I maintain—the capability to manage them is also moved. This is a phenomenon that elsewhere I have called the "migration of symbols" (Nardella 2015), within a general theory that I have conceptualized as the outcome of a process of gradual re-objectivization of religious symbols outside their field. I am referring in particular to a "second-level objectivization" obtained from a set of first-level objectivizations already institutionalized by the religious specialists (Nardella 2015, p. 112 ff.; see also Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 110 ff.). From this point of view, one can maintain that within the fields where this migration takes place, religious symbols do not disappear but persist as capital to be used to create new cultural products that perform functions to the pure benefit of the power system of these sectors and their specialists.

3. Valorization of Religions

This is where the research presented in this Special Issue comes in, demonstrating that symbols change in that their meanings change, are renewed and reinvented, and in some cases even overturned so that they can be adapted to the advantage of the new contexts of use. An issue of critical relevance is the changing "value" of religion, which, being expressed in a variety of registers and contexts, provides potent symbolic resources that can be put to a variety of social purposes by both religious and non-religious actors, whether collective or individual (e.g., religious organizations and leaders, political parties, movements and candidates, corporations and marketers, journalists and book authors, screenwriters and directors, webmasters, app designers and Internet users themselves). Among the most intriguing questions are those surrounding the role of religion and of the media in these developments, more specifically how religions—with their largely recognizable sets of symbols, narratives, and values—are deployed as a form of symbolic currency in the production of media content and products that can respond to a broad range of both religious and nonreligious interests, why this is valued in today's media marketplace and in which ways the media and systems of mediation make these different types of "valorizations"—ascriptions of value—of religions possible (Hjelm 2015, p. 15).

Of course, these briefly sketched insights should be explored much further. Nevertheless, I would like to highlight one final aspect, connected to the new relations emerging between the religious sector and other social sectors as a result of the use of religious symbolic goods. Historically, it is not the first time that religious symbologies have been used for ends, with meanings and in contexts belonging to other sectors of society.

So, what has changed with respect to the past? Mainly this: that today these symbologies are used even if the religious field neither directly nor indirectly offers them up for use. The fact that the religious field does not make its symbols available to the subjects who use them is decisive here. Indeed, this Special Issue mostly deals with cases in which this explicit or implicit offer is not made. Nevertheless, in other situations, this is precisely what used to happen. I say "used to", not so much to indicate that this no longer happens, but to underline a change: the passage from a condition in which the use of religious symbols led to building beneficial alliances between the religious field and the users of its symbols to a condition in which non-religious actors take possession of religious symbols without this resulting in a mutual exchange of legitimation, recognition, or justification (cf. Nardella 2017).

As such, the religious symbolic goods cease to produce value for the field that created them, as they no longer perform beneficial functions in its favor in terms of social consensus or cultural hegemony. This has no small consequences. One of these is that the access to symbols and above all to the consensus built up around them over time is becoming increasingly accessible from outside the religious field, in the same way as their management has ended up being shared by several social fields at the same time.

What fields are we talking about? Among the social sectors asserting themselves as users and at the same time managers of symbols pertaining to the religious field, we have already indicated the media—in turn divided into an assortment of specialized and relatively autonomous subsectors that go from journalism to television to the music industry—and the field of marketing. Another field should be added to the ones analyzed in the studies herein and that is the political one, where these days displaying religious symbols for electoral purposes has become a widespread practice, above all (but not only) among the populist leaders of the Western world (e.g., Roy 2016; Hoover 2020).

But the discourse could be even more complex than that. Indeed, there is one final hypothesis to put forward, namely, that the abovementioned processes end up going to such extremes that the symbols even become open to management by single individuals who, thanks to social media networks, are increasingly able to transform from simple users of messages into accredited "broadcasters" of content. A foretaste of this trend may be seen in the phenomenon of social media platforms, whose relevance is confirmed by the enormous following they generate among Internet users. This begs the question of whether a transformation of this type, in which the roles of both user and producer come together in the single individual, awaits us in the future, with entirely new consequences for religious symbols and the organizations that control them.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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