

# **“Religions and their Publics” - Teaching Guide (James Bielo and Eric Hoenes del Pinal)**

“Religions and their Publics” is a new collection of essays about religion in the contemporary world, hosted by The Immanent Frame. The collection features eight short essays, which collectively explore how religious communities create, maintain, contest, and materialize visions of public life.

Seven of the essays explore distinct ethnographic locales: multilingual struggles of nonliberal Jews in Brooklyn, New York City; competing versions of space and media among Catholics and evangelicals in Cobán, Guatemala; the dynamics of synagogue space among Jews in Copenhagen, Denmark; gendered experiences of Muslims amid Quebec, Canada’s proposed Bill 60; territorial claims made by Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; sexual politics among Christians and Muslims in Abuja, Nigeria; and, the making of a biblical theme park by creationist Protestants in Kentucky. The eighth essay critically frames the ethnographic pieces in light of current discussions about religion and pluralism.

Given the ethnographic range of these essays, their quality, their brevity (all between 2-3,000 words), and their accessibility (freely available on TIF), this collection is amenable to multiple course uses. In particular, these essays can benefit students in courses that deal centrally with questions of religion, secularism, and/or the public sphere. For those considering “Religion and their Publics” for course use, here are a few discussion questions to draw from:

- The term “public” can have multiple uses. For example, “public” can refer to an official/state designation, a shared social space, a physical or symbolic commons, and an audience or constituency. How are different uses of “public” operating in these essays? Are they working in concert or in conflict with each other?
- Public religion and religious publics are often contested. Where is this evident in the essays? What is being contested? Who is contesting? What resources are used to contest? And, what is at stake in these struggles? What larger, perhaps unforeseen, consequences might these contests

have?

- In several essays, electronic mass media and communication technology are central to the analysis. How are mass media and technology used as mediums for establishing and connecting with religious publics? Why might these media and technologies be especially important for some religious communities, and less so for others?
- Language and discourse are also central to several of the essays. How is language used to construct and mobilize religious publics? In what ways might other sign systems impact these processes?
- A third theme that emerges across the essays is the role of embodiment in religious practice. How are bodies and the senses used to form and define religious publics? Why might different kinds of religious actors think about the body and/or the senses in differing ways?
- Why might arguments invoking religion (whether a particular religion or the general category itself) carry special force in these debates? What about arguments that invoke secularity? Why might actors who are taking up the mantles of religion or secularity have particular stakes in, or feel a responsibility to shape, the public sphere?
- In his review of the collection, Gregory Starrett suggests that these ethnographic essays inform broader discussions of what it means to live in a pluralist society and what role religion might play in a pluralistic public sphere. What considerations about pluralism and citizenship emerge from these essays? Note that Starrett uses a popular song lyric to frame his comments. What is he suggesting with this lyric? And, what song would you use to capture the lesson(s) about pluralism in this collection?

We hope “Religions and their Publics” will be a valuable addition to your courses! And, we’d love to hear any feedback based on your course use.

Best,

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