Article

Talking ‘Religion’: Publics, Politics and Media

February 8, 2024

Scholars and journalists tackling religion, politics and public discourse

How can scholars and journalists working on the frontlines of religion, politics, and public life effectively share their insights with each other and the broader public? More importantly, how can they do so in a way that maintains the depth and complexity of their findings while remaining accessible and engaging?

“Talking ‘Religion’: Publics, Politics and the Media,” an initiative supported by the Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism and International Affairs and hosted by Northwestern University, aims to address these critical questions. The project is designed to create new opportunities for scholars in the fields of religion and politics to publicize their work, while also providing journalists with fresh perspectives for reporting on religion.

The initiative offers tools and frameworks to elevate public discourse on religion and politics beyond simplistic narratives—moving past the uncritical praise of religion as a source of morality and community, or its blanket condemnation as a root of global instability.

Key questions guiding this endeavor include:

1. What are the most effective ways for scholars and journalists to describe the complex

intersections of global religious, legal, governmental, and economic practice at a historical moment in which notions of “secularism,” “modernity,” and “religious freedom” seem to have been exhausted?

2. What are the optimal avenues for social scientists, humanists, and journalists to work together to improve public understanding of these issues?
3. How can new possibilities for conceptualizing and reporting on religion and public life be articulated clearly and communicated effectively to audiences beyond the academy?

2022 Symposium: Global ‘Religion’: Invention, Translation, Critique

Source: Christian Lue via Unsplash

> ***Yet it is clear that what Westerners typically have in mind when they speak of ‘religion’ is closely tied to Western experiences and Western concepts. When they try to use the term outside the West, in different cultural contexts, they often find themselves either stretching the term beyond recognition or reshaping the cultural contexts to fit the term. The process is not simply one of translation; it involves a complex negotiation of meanings, power dynamics, and resistance.***
>
> —Talal Asad, “Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam.”

On June 3, 2022, Northwestern University hosted the symposium “Global ‘Religion’: Invention, Translation, Critique,” organized by the Global Religion & Politics (GRP) group. This event, like their 2019 workshop, aimed to examine the reception, translation, and transformation of the concept of religion beyond its European origins.

The symposium addressed how religion, a category with complex and evolving boundaries, has become global and multifaceted. Initially shaped by colonialism, and later by media, capital flows, transnational religious authorities, and international law, the concept of religion has not merely radiated outwards from Europe or North America. This symposium highlighted the dynamic interactions and resistances that shape religion’s global journey.

The event aimed to shift the conversation, listening to voices often marginalized in dominant discourses. It brought together scholars from various disciplines to discuss legal, political, and intellectual contexts outside Europe and North America, as well as marginalized practices within these regions.

Hosted by the Weinberg College Center for International and Area Studies, the symposium introduced new faculty, graduate students, and colleagues to GRP’s efforts in fostering a community around shared research interests and advancing discussions on non-Western perspectives in religious studies.

Click here to read more about the 2022 Symposium

2019 Symposium: Reporting Islam: Media, Policy, Politics

This international symposium (April 25 to 26, 2019) at Northwestern University convened scholars from diverse fields such as Islam, international and public affairs, education, race, and law, alongside practicing journalists and attorneys. The gathering aimed to critically

examine the conventions and tropes that dominate contemporary public discourse on religion, with a particular focus on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims both in the United States and globally.

A key objective of the symposium was to foster a critical dialogue on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives, 'radicalization,' and how these topics are covered in journalism and scholarly debate on so-called religious violence.

Participants delved into methods and strategies for writing and reporting on these issues that move beyond using religion as the primary explanatory framework. The goal was to develop and promote new modes of public discourse that challenge and critique the tropes that urgently need reevaluation.

The keynote lectures were:

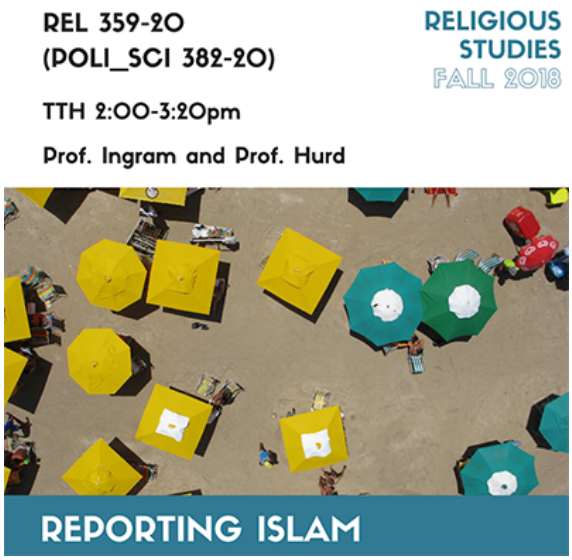
- Leila Fadel, NPR national correspondent covering issues of culture, diversity, and race
- Ramzi Kassem, professor of law at the City University of New York where he co-directs the Immigrant & Non-Citizen Rights Clinic

In line with the critical conversations held at the symposium, journalists Alex Ruppenthal and Asraa Mustufa produced a comprehensive report, delving into extensive records concerning Illinois' former Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program. Their investigation unveiled previously undisclosed connections between the program, the FBI, and local law enforcement. Despite the Trump administration's recent revival of CVE grants, notable Democrats such as Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have previously expressed support for this approach. This suggests that CVE is poised to maintain a presence within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the foreseeable future.

intersections

Click here to read more about the 2019 Symposium

How to Report Accurately on Islam?



In the fall of 2018, Brannon Ingram and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd collaborated to deliver "Reporting Islam" at Northwestern University. This innovative and interdisciplinary course convened students from the Medill School of Journalism and the Weinberg College of Arts & Sciences, who shared a deep interest in exploring Islam and Muslims in the United States, U.S. foreign policy, and the complexities inherent in reporting on these subjects.

The course achieved its objectives through a multifaceted approach encompassing readings, site visits, individual and group projects, and critical writing assignments. These activities were designed to:

- Empower students to discern and critique the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in U.S. print media and other mediums, recognizing prevalent pitfalls in representation.
- Cultivate innovative approaches to writing about Islam and Muslims that avoid perpetuating Islamophobic or Islamophilic narratives often prevalent in reporting.

Integral to the course was a “master class” on reporting religion, led by Manya Brachear, the esteemed religion reporter for the Chicago Tribune. Additionally, students had the opportunity to engage in “Talking ‘Religion’”-related activities, such as lectures and the spring 2019 symposium, enriching their understanding and perspectives on the intersection of religion, media, and society.

Click here to read about the student reporting featured at the symposium.

Below is the full course syllabus for “Reporting Islam”, provided with the permission of the authors.

Rel-359_Poli-Sci-390-Reporting-Islam-fall-2018_updated-10-10Download

Research Network

The “Talking ‘Religion’” initiative forms an integral component of an interdisciplinary and transnational collaboration of scholars, under the leadership of co-Principal Investigators Nadia Marzouki (Sciences Po) and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (Northwestern). This consortium is dedicated to reimagining the discourse and application of concepts such as “radicalization” and “violent extremism.”

What sets this project apart is its aspiration to establish an international academic forum where researchers can compare, confront, and critique different studies and experiments about radicalization.