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Afterword



Religious Populism: A Paradigmatic Mode of Address of the Hybrid Media Environment?

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Abstract

This Afterword concludes the special issue on Religious Populism in Hybrid Media Environments. The three perspectives of how religious populism re-sacralizes politics – mythologizing tradition, exalting charismatic leadership and ritualizing political life – are used to explain how the properties, affordances and logics of contemporary hybrid communication and related media environment intertwine, enable and enhance religious populism on a global scale. The Afterword argues that the articles of the special issue provide noteworthy conceptual and theoretical contributions for the development of populism studies with their focus on religious populism and media.

Keywords

religious populism – hybrid media – tradition – charismatic leadership – ritualization – politics

This special issue provides an important contribution to the study field of populism by bringing analytical depth to the concept and idea of religious populism, a perspective that has attracted growing interest among many scholars of populism.¹ The articles included in this issue convincingly demonstrate that developing theoretical concepts in close dialogue with empirical research conducted in a multiplicity of cultural contexts that reach beyond the hegemonic Western academia can greatly advance research on populism as a global phenomenon.² Consequently, concepts discussed in these articles offer new perspectives for further analysis of populist leaders and movements and their cultural and political implications in different parts of the world.

1 What is Religious Populism?

According to Yilmaz and his colleagues in this special issue, “the aim behind the concept of religious populism is to comprehend and examine the religious dimension of populist manifestations.”³ This formulation offers an ‘at a glance’ description of what is at stake in religious populism. In their introduction, the guest editors, Fiza Vasudeva and Dayei Oh, take a step further in their discussion of the concept, to argue for a discursive approach, where populist appeals to “the people” are seen to be reinforced by various religious discourses (including symbols, rituals and narratives). This approach suggests that “religion” and

1 DeHanas, D M., & Shterin, M. (eds.) (2020). *Religion and the Rise of Populism*. Routledge.

2 Go, J (2016). *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*. Oxford University Press. See also: Gurminder, B. K. (2014) *Connected Sociologies*. Bloomsbury. The argument that “the prism of alternative and conceptual apparatuses” developed in post-colonial contexts should be explored more has also been made in the context of conspiracy theories by Gagliardone, I., Gagliardone, I., Pohjonen, M., Diepeveen, S. & Olaniran, S. (2023). Clones and zombies: rethinking conspiracy theories and the digital public sphere through a (post)-colonial perspective. *Information, Communication and Society*, 26(12), 2419–2438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2239890>.

3 Yilmaz, L., De Groot Heupner, S., Morieson, N. & Bliuc, A-M. (2025, this special issue).

“populism” are considered as interdependent, but also fluid and contested, fields of discursive meaning-making.

Furthermore, Vasudeva and Oh explain how religious populism and populist leaders “reconfigure religion as a dynamic source of moral and existential significance, tapping into society’s lingering residues of the sacred to construct counter-societies that challenge secular frameworks.” They explore how the reconfiguration of religion “helps re-sacralize politics by aligning nationalist or cultural symbols with transcendent ideals and by recasting the political community as a moral-spiritual entity embattled by an impure ‘Other’.”⁴

This type of populist reconfiguration of religion has three consequences, they continue. Firstly, tradition is mythologized. Through this mythologization, religious populism bridges the present times and feelings of people with sacred histories or divine covenants, drawing on collective memory and conferring a transcendent mission. Secondly, religious populism conflates religious and populist authority, exalting charismatic, morally pure leadership with divine mandates. Thirdly, in religious populism political life is ritualized in ways that foster “emotionally charged communal experiences reminiscent of religious ceremonies.”⁵

In this Afterword, we use these three perspectives of how religious populism re-sacralizes politics – mythologizing tradition, exalting charismatic leadership and ritualizing political life – to explain how the properties, affordances and logics of contemporary hybrid communication and related media environment intertwine, enable and enhance religious populism on a global scale. Along the way, we take illustrations from the articles in this issue to discuss these phenomena as evolving contributions to the theorizing and concept-building of populism studies in the present media context. The Afterword ends with a brief reflection on future avenues for research on religion and populism in the hybrid media environment.

2 Hybrid Media Environment as *The* Context for Religious Populism

In the spirit of Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum, “the medium is the message,” we build on the premise that media technologies intertwine with their cultural usage practices to become particular kinds of social environments for humans, and consequently enhance and favor certain discursive logics and

4 Vasudeva, F. & Oh, D. (2025, this special issue).

5 Vasudeva, F. & Oh, D. (2025, this special issue).

modes of address over others. In this sense, we claim that the social imaginaries and related discursive logics enabled and enhanced by the hybrid media environment favor religious populist imaginaries and related styles of communication.⁶

The concept of the hybrid media environment⁷ has become a well-utilized concept within the scholarship of media and communication studies when referring to key characteristics in the contemporary media environment. Borrowing from Andrew Chadwick's⁸ idea, first adapted to political communication, communication is argued to be transformed into a hybrid practice in a media system due to the new interactive logics between old and established practices of journalism and new(er) practices and affordances of social media.

In recent years, researchers have further developed the idea of the hybrid media environment and related communication and placed more explicit emphasis on the blurring of the categories of production and reception (of messages and communication), as well as convergence and remediation between different actors, platforms and communication logics in the context.⁹ Most importantly, much of the current analysis looks at the contemporary, algorithmic hybrid media communication as thoroughly commodified and driven by competition over visibility and the user's affective attention. Such communicative logics typically prioritize polarizing, provocative, emotionally laden content, making this communication environment more vulnerable to the spread of mis- and disinformation and related political implications.¹⁰

6 Valaskivi, K. (2024). Imagining communities with 'intelligent' machines: Innovationism and the hope for alternative imagination. *Journal of Digital Social Research*.

7 Sumiala, J. M., Valaskivi, K., Tikka, M., Huhtamäki, J. (2018). *Hybrid Media Events: The Charlie Hebdo Attacks and the Global Circulation of Terrorist Violence*. Emerald, Valaskivi, K., & Robertson, D. G. (2022). Introduction: epistemic contestations in the hybrid media environment. *Popular communication : the international journal of media and culture*, 20(3), 153–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2057998>.

8 Chadwick, A. (2017). *Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford University Press. 2nd edition.

9 E.g. Lindgren, S. (2014) (ed.) *Hybrid media culture*. Routledge.

10 Bennett, W.L. & Livingstone, S. (Eds.) (2018). *The Disinformation Age*. University of Cambridge Press; Kannasto, E., Laaksonen, S.-M., & Knuutila, A. (2023). I 🌹 🍀 FI You! – Emojis as Emotional-Political Signifiers in Finnish Election Campaign Discussion Online. teoksessa *Proceedings of the 56th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 2370–2379). Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. <https://hdl.handle.net/10125/102925>.

3 Mythologization of the Past and/or Tradition Fuels Religious Populism

Nostalgic mythologization of the past and/or tradition plays a significant role in fueling communication in a hybrid media environment and consequently endorsing religious populism. This mythologization of tradition can be demonstrated in such right-wing populist slogans as “make America great again” or in populist mystifying of “the people” and their unique history and origin. Dayei Oh’s article on the US abortion wars in this special issue provides an illustration of the Christian populist mythologization of the genealogy of the nation and the mission of “righteous” pro-life people to seek truth as they defend the rights of unborn children as the future of the Christian nation. Typically, such mythologized narratives of the past (and of tradition) are applied in the populist discourse to counter and demonize the “Other,” whether it refers to “wokes” or “globalists,” as in the case of right-wing pro-life supporters (Oh’s article), or “non-Muslims” demonized in populist nation-building among religious populist supporters in Pakistan, Turkey and Indonesia, as analyzed here by Yilmaz and his colleagues. A common feature fueling religious populism in this context has to do with an articulation of the risk: “the Other” threatening the idea of the mythical, pure nation, its true people and their sacred traditions and genealogies.

Consequently, the style in which contemporary religious populism mythologizes tradition/past is closely related to the ways in which community is imagined within these narratives and related discursive logics. The hybrid media environment as a context and mode of communication accelerates the developments of individualization (e.g. the right to be born, as in the US abortion wars, or a religious right to belong to a nation, as in the case of Islamic populism), but it also enhances competition in “the market of worldviews.”¹¹ Since the algorithms of social media platforms prioritize affective material (e.g. pro-life) that incites reactions, triggering content gets priority. As the existing literature¹² demonstrates, the most appealing content that triggers human beings is content that deals with identity, ideology and/or worldviews, and consequently makes religious populism a lucrative mode of address for the platforms. In this circumstance, the hybrid media environment functions

11 Einstein, M. (2007). *Brands of Faith. Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*. Routledge.

12 E.g. Abdel-Fadil, M. (2019). “The Politics of Affect: the Glue of Religious and Identity Conflicts in Social Media.” *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 8(1), 11–34. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-00801002>.

within a two-sided logic: on one hand, it enhances “bubbles” of like-minded people, while on the other it constantly exposes people to opposing opinions.¹³ This dynamic leads into affective polarization on media platforms (and in society) as people revert to opposing identity positions stemming from related religious populist identity positions. Consequently, it becomes more and more difficult to discuss political issues through facts or rational debate, since certain stances are immediately interpreted as identity markers that can be only either supported or opposed.

4 Celebrity Performance of Charismatic Leadership Exalts Religious Populism

The development of global-scale celebrity culture is undeniably a media phenomenon. From the 1960s onwards, commercial celebrity culture and political communication have grown closer together,¹⁴ merging, perhaps in the most obvious way, with the former Hollywood movie star Ronald Reagan becoming President of the United States in 1981. The power of charismatic religious and political leaders is hardly ever expanded without an ability (or that of aides) to innovate with the available media technologies of the time.¹⁵ Notorious historical examples are Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union; contemporary ones include Vladimir Putin of Russia, Donald Trump of the US, and Narendra Modi of India, to name just a few.

Perhaps the most important new affordance which the hybrid media environment offers to aspiring religious/political leaders is the possibility to bypass established media institutions and production infrastructures by using different social media platforms and tactics. Populist politicians in different parts of the world have proven skillful in utilizing this property of the media environment.¹⁶

13 Pariser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble. What internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Books.; Aral, S. (2020) *The Hype Machine. How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy and Our Health – and how We Must Adapt*. HarperCollins Publishers Limited.

14 Wernick, A. (1991). *Promotional culture: Advertising, ideology and symbolic expression*. Sage Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22346-6_17.

15 Wu, T. (2017). *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside of Our Heads*. Penguin Random House.

16 E.g. Hatakka, N. (2019). *Populism in the hybrid media system: Populist radical right online counterpublics interacting with journalism, party politics, and citizen activism*. *Annales Universitatis Turkuensis TOM*. 487.

Becoming a charismatic leader of a populist movement, however, takes more than media savviness – or simple ‘utilization’ of religion. This is eloquently demonstrated in Fiza Vasudeva’s analysis of the Hindutva movement and its leader Narendra Modi in India, in her contribution to this special issue. The concept of political deification, and her idea of populist *darshani* where “the public’s act of gazing at their leader becomes a way of constructing and reinforcing their identity as ‘the people,’”¹⁷ illuminates the concept of charismatic leadership from an angle that offers a culturally nuanced and new conceptual contribution to populism research.

In his article Ali Alsayegh also addresses a question of charismatic leadership in a framework of “affective bond.” In Alsayegh’s perception, the affective bond applied in the hybrid media environment by charismatic leaders and adapted by their followers has a significant impact in building up and maintaining political leadership (as charismatic) in the present hybrid media environment. Furthermore, he argues, such a bond calls for absolute trust, premised upon followers’ recognition of the charismatic leader as a symbol of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity. All these elements contribute to building strong ties between populist leadership and their followers.

From another perspective, in their article Silvija Vuković and Nina Krapić examine *celebrity populism* as an emerging trend in religious populism, and view it as deeply embedded in the communicative logics of the hybrid media environment. Introducing the concept of celebrity populism, they discuss it in the framework of Instagram influencer culture,¹⁸ demonstrating how politicians may amplify their populist message by blending celebrity and popular communication elements with religious (here Catholic) populist messages. In addition, in line with Alsayegh, they place particular emphasis on the analysis of the performance of authenticity – a crucial communicative strategy in social media – in better understanding how populist leaders as charismatic figures address and maintain affective bonds with their followers as potential political supporters and voters.

The findings of the articles by Vasudeva, Alsayegh and Vuković and Krapić demonstrate a clear interdependency between present-day hybrid media logics and the communicative logics of charismatic leadership associated with religious populism. It appears that adaptation of such performative and communicative strategies helps populist political leaders to address new audiences and potential political supporters beyond the agenda-setting power of legacy

17 Vasudeva, F. (2025, this special issue).

18 See also: Sonnevend J. (2024). *Charm: How Magnetic Personalities Shape Global Politics*. Princeton University Press.

media and their immediate constituencies, and to maintain these affective bonds through adaptation and assimilation of the key emotional and affective communication logics of the hybrid media environment.

5 Mediatized Rituals of Political Life Structure Religious Populism

In the first part of this Afterword, we emphasized the nature of the hybrid media communication environment as thoroughly commodified, driven by algorithmic competition over visibility and the user's affective attention. One important communicative tool in that competition is eventization.¹⁹ This refers to how the hybrid media environment generates and boosts events that can accelerate and amplify (affective) audience attention and thus magnify message circulation. Religiously inspired or framed public incidents that trigger strong emotions effectively serve such a purpose. We may think of examples such as pro-life demonstrations as mediatized events in the US, or social media performances as events built around charismatic leadership, and the popular communication tools applied to make these events into social media performances of political leadership as authentic, trustworthy and legitimate. Additionally, as symbolic battlegrounds such events performed in the hybrid media environment provide fertile soil for the rise and spread of religious populism, and they endorse identity positions and affective polarizations between "us," "them" and the "Other."

Widely circulated media events in the hybrid media environment also provide charismatic leaders with new means to virtually ritualize their power and thus expand their influence on their supporters and loyal followers beyond the local. Again, Vasudeva's article demonstrates how religious rituals can be infused with political communication in the case of Indian Prime Minister Modi. Such practices enhance the sense of community and belonging and, intensify circulation of shared imaginaries and mythologizations of the past, present and future of these populist groups – where they originate, and where they are heading. They also endorse the power of the hybrid media environment as a central framework of the public appeal of religious populism.

19 Sumiala, J. M., Valaskivi, K., Tikka, M., Huhtamäki, J. (2018). *Hybrid Media Events: The Charlie Hebdo Attacks and the Global Circulation of Terrorist Violence*. Emerald

6 The Paradigmatic Mode of Address?

In this Afterword, we have outlined some critical ways in which the present hybrid media environment shapes, conditions and enables the presence and spread of religious populism in today's world. The empirical studies presented here argue compellingly that religious populism, and its manifestations in the mediatized relationships between religious populist leaders and their supporters, is best understood as deeply interdependent with the communicative logics of the hybrid media environment. The more that populist leaders and their supporters adapt to the present communicative logics of the hybrid media environment, the better their chances of succeeding in gaining political power. These empirical studies also address a rich variety of cultural resources applied to foster religious populism by its political promoters. Consequently, the articles shed new light on religious populism and its presence and performance in the hybrid media environment as a culturally nuanced practice, and hence they enrich conceptual and empirical understanding of this globally spreading phenomenon.

A question that remains to be addressed concerns the broader political implications and consequences of such an infusion of religious populism and the hybrid media environment. In other words, if the discursive strategies of religious populism represent the paradigmatic mode of address in the hybrid media environment, what does this development mean for the future of politics and related political life in contemporary, media-immersed societies?

We end our Afterword with two concerns. Our first relates to the rapidly circulating and intensified polarizations between different religious and ideological groups and communities, and the acceleration of affective identity politics between them, combined with demonization of the "Other." We argue that such tendencies, accelerated and amplified by the communicative logics of the hybrid media environment, threaten to increase societal distrust, hatred, unrest and instability, all trends that endorse anti-democratic developments in society. Our second concern, closely connected, has to do with "content confusion,"²⁰ a characteristic of the communicative logics of the hybrid

20 The concept of content confusion originally refers to Mara Einstein's (2016) idea of advertising potentially "hiding" in different types of contents. Valaskivi (2022) has expanded the idea to discuss the collapse of genre boundaries and expectations on social media platforms, which has resulted to a situation where for users it is in practice impossible to know what is the motivation and initial mode of address behind different types of circulating contents online. Einstein, M. (2016). *Black Ops Advertising: Native Ads, Content Marketing, and the Covert World of the Digital Sell*. OR Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv62hdmb>;

media environment. While religious populist actors try, in line with hybrid media logics, to make the most (beneficial) use of the surrounding communicative environment and blend different categories – popular and fictional with informational and factual, spiritual and ritual with argumentative – the shared principles of making politics in society threaten to fall apart. This trend may result not only in a crisis of democracy, but in a fundamental rupture of epistemological foundations in contemporary societies.

These concerns will be magnified with the rapid development of generative AIs and their potential to muddle socially shared categories of “real” and “factual” with “fake” and “artificial”. We argue that “the rush hour of religious populism,”²¹ discussed by Vasudeva and Oh in their Introduction, is only “a click away” from the current scholarship on religion, populism and media.

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21 Vasudeva, F. & Oh, D. (2025, this special issue).

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