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Rush Hour of Populists: Religious Populism and Hybrid Media

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Abstract

The introduction to the special issue develops a framework for understanding religious populism in hybrid media environments, emphasizing its role as a mode of meaning-making that intertwines political and religious logics. Moving beyond conventional approaches that frame religious populism as either the politicization of religion or the sacralization of politics, we highlight its capacity to shape collective identities through transcendencies – the drive to move beyond immediate experience and construct systems of significance. We argue that religious populism extends beyond institutional structures, functioning as a culturally embedded process that reinterprets and reclaims meaning-making in contemporary society. Within hybrid media environments, where digital and traditional platforms intersect, these dynamics are intensified through algorithmic visibility, direct engagement, and the erosion of institutional religious gatekeeping. By situating religious populism within broader media and cultural transformations, this introduction underscores its influence in contemporary political and religious landscapes.

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Keywords

religious populism – hybrid media – transcendencies – populist theory – populist communication

The contemporary global political landscape has witnessed a striking surge in populism. This rush hour of populists, akin to H. Neill MacFarland's concept of the 'rush hour of the gods' in post-war Japan.[1] Just as Japan experienced an explosion of new religious movements responding to the traumas and uncertainties following World War II, present-day societies confront a constellation of destabilizing forces: globalization's intensification, widening economic inequalities, cultural shifts, environmental crises, and evolving global hegemonies. These pressures have created fertile conditions for populist figures who promise not only material relief but also religious solutions to modern anxieties.

The term 'rush hour' aptly conveys the urgency and intensity with which these populist movements emerge and gain traction, often leveraging hybrid media environments – a blend of traditional and digital communication platforms – to amplify their messages.[2] The hybrid media environment facilitates the dissemination and mobilization via populist logic, enabling leaders to bypass conventional gatekeepers and connect directly with followers.[3] The urgency and intensity of populist mobilization are heightened by the real-time, affect-laden communication characteristic of these platforms. Consequently, populism in this era is neither merely localized nor episodic but a pervasive global trend that quickly adapts to regional contexts and contemporary challenges.

Within this global wave, religion has emerged as a critical axis of populist politics. Figures such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey), Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Narendra Modi (India), Peter Obi (Nigeria), Muqtada al-Sadr (Iraq), Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel), and others have foregrounded religious themes in their populist appeals, invoking the authority of the sacred to consolidate power and galvanize supporters. For

1 MacFarland, N. *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan.* (London: Harper Colophon Books, 1967).

2 Chadwick, A. *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

3 Sumiala, J., Hoover, S. M., and Laughlin, C. "Religious Populism?: Rethinking Concepts and Consequences in a Hybrid Media Age Introduction." *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 2023, 2795–2804.

some, religion offers a moral mandate to protect the 'true' nation or uphold an endangered cultural and religious heritage; for others, it becomes an exclusionary tool, defining who does – or does not – belong within the boundaries of the community.[4] Whether religion is employed to bolster personal ambition or to pursue political and religious goals, its enduring power as a source of emotional resonance and communal identity remains a consistent thread. The convergence of populism and religion offers a stark illustration of how religious ideas, practices, affiliations, and discourses can be recontextualized as potent signifiers in mass politics. At times, it fosters communal solidarity and rejuvenates national mythologies; at other moments, it deepens social fractures, pitting 'righteous' people against 'immoral' or 'alien' others. Either way, religious populism can reconfigure hegemony, demonstrating how sacralized narratives can shape policy, governance, and collective belonging.[5] In this sense, religion acts as both a 'battlefield and a bridge'.

Considering the rush hour of religious populists, this special issue contributes to the expanding scholarship on religious populism by exploring its multifaceted interactions within hybrid media environments. Drawing on diverse case studies and theoretical approaches, the collection illustrates how religious populist logics strategically employ both traditional and digital platforms to shape discourses, rally supporters, and forge collective identities. In turn, these hybrid media ecosystems accelerate the circulation and adaptation of religious populist narratives across diverse cultural and socio-political landscapes.

At the same time, this special issue challenges a dominant narrative wherein religion is cast as an inherently corrosive force – a toxin fueling intolerance, discord, and resistance to rational governance. Rather than merely politicizing religion, religious populism arises through a strategic interplay of populist logic and religious discourse, forging moral boundaries and collective identities grounded in transcendent claims of legitimacy. By treating 'religion' and 'populism' as fluid, contested fields of meaning, we emphasize how religious populism consolidates authority and nurtures communal belonging through shared vocabularies of faith and popular will, facilitated by hybrid media's vast reach. Drawing on diverse regional examples, the articles in this issue demonstrate that religious populism thrives in broader socio-cultural contexts where

4 Moffitt, B. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016; Yilmaz, I. and Morieson, N. "Islam and Civilizational Populism." In *Religions and the Global Rise of Civilizational Populism*, 45–109. (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023).

5 Jawad, R., Béland, D., and Pavolini, E. "State of the Art:'The People'and Their Social Rights: What Is Distinctive About the Populism-Religion-Social Policy Nexus?" *Social Policy and Society*, 20(2), 2021, 267–281.

religion, culture, and media intersect. Collectively, these contributions reveal how religious populism reconfigures identities, moral frameworks, and public imaginaries within our rapidly evolving political landscapes, reshaping collective aspirations and deepening our understanding of religion's political significance beyond simplistic or adversarial assumptions.

1 Mapping Religious Populism: Two-Dimensional and Tripartite Approaches

While the phenomena of religious and populist resurgence have been extensively explored in their own right, the intersection between the two remains an emerging area of scholarly inquiry.[6] Much of the existing scholarship on religious populism conceptualizes it as a two-dimensional phenomenon, comprising 'overtly religious' and 'covertly religious' dimensions.[7] In the former view, religious populism is tied to the 'politicization of religion' wherein the traditional religion can function as a mechanism to legitimize social orders, political regimes, or broader communities by positioning them as safeguards against perceived foes.[8] Within the framework of religious populism, this dynamic manifests in the use of revealed or scriptural religious traditions to sanctify specific causes or agendas, imbuing them with divine or moral authority. Populist leaders or movements in this mode assert that they execute god's will, emboldening their adherents to perceive themselves as divinely mandated agents contending against either secular or godless foes. Contra, the latter view is said to be more implicit, involving the 'sacralization of politics,' wherein a community's worldly aspirations become invested with transcendent significance.[9] Through mythic language, ritualized performances, and moral absolutes, populists cast their agenda as singularly redemptive, surmounting the quotidian realm of 'evil' or 'corrupt' politics.

6 Arato, A., and Cohen, J. L. "Civil Society, Populism, and Religion." In *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism,* edited by De la Torre, 98–112. London: Routledge, 2019;DeHanas, D. N., and Shterin, M. "Religion and the Rise of Populism." *Religion, State & Society* 46, no. 3 (2018): 177–185; Zúquete, J. P. "Populism and Religion." In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism,* edited by C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy, 445–466. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

7 Peker, E., and Laxer, E. "Populism and Religion: Toward a Global Comparative Agenda." Comparative Sociology 20, no. 3 (2021): 317–343; Zúquete, J. P. *Populism and Religion*.

8 Zúquete, J. P. *Populism and Religion*.

9 Zúquete, J. P. "Missionary Politics – A Contribution to the Study of Populism." *Religion Compass* 7, no. 7 (2013): 263–271.

This two-dimensional model clarifies some salient features of religious populism. Scholars note that populist movements frequently blend devotion with the quasi-religious zeal of a sacred political mission. Erdoğan's appeals to Turkey's Islamic heritage, Modi's emphasis on Hindu civilization, or Trump's evangelical-inflected rhetoric can be read, in part, as overt references to divine authority. Meanwhile, their framing of 'the people' as an absolute moral collective – bound by cultural memory, sacred rituals, and an exalted sense of destiny – might illustrate the covert dimension of religious populism, where politics itself becomes sacralized. Such an approach is not without merit, as it illuminates how religious populist leaders oscillate between explicit God-talk and more generalized *mythmaking* that sanctifies a given community's historical or cultural mission.

While this dual framework has proven helpful for mapping the main contours of religious populism, it can inadvertently simplify a complex reality. First, it can presume a clear-cut distinction between overt and covert religiosity. In practice, many populist movements blend scriptural or religious appeals with cultural or national mythologies, shifting seamlessly between explicit God-talk and subtler forms of ritualistic politics. Leaders who claim to do God's work frequently also engage in sacralizing the secular, such as depicting the homeland as the cradle of a sacred civilization threatened by outside forces.[10] These elements are not neatly separated but often operate in tandem, reinforcing one another in dynamic discursive and rhetorical performances.

Second, the overt/covert dichotomy may overemphasize doctrinal religion versus sacralized politics, neglecting historical and even postcolonial contexts. In different societal contexts, including those shaped by colonial legacies – the lines between religious authority and cultural identity have never been sharply drawn.[11] Movements that appear overtly religious could be partly motivated by ethnic or nationalist sentiments, while those that are covertly religious might still rely on references embedded in local traditions. This perspective also disrupts the assumption that the sacralization of politics is predominantly a modern Western phenomenon.[12] On the contrary, it uncovers a historically ingrained trajectory in postcolonial contexts where religion and politics have long been intertwined as tools for resistance, identity formation, and legitimacy. Furthermore, this dynamic is not exclusive to either Western

10 Brubaker, R. "Why Populism?" *Theory and Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 357–385.

11 Chatterjee, P. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Abeysekara, A. *The Politics of Postsecular Religion: Mourning Secular Futures.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

12 Zúquete, J. P. *Populism and Religion*.

or postcolonial contexts. Several countries, such as Japan, do not fit neatly into these categories but where religion and politics are deeply intertwined. The two-dimensional model, with its assumption of a modern, secular baseline onto which religion is either 'tacked on' or 'smuggled in' can underestimate these legacies.[13]

Third, focusing on *how* religion is manifest (overtly or covertly) can overshadow the question of *why* religion proves so instrumental in populist mobilizations. Researchers risk treating religion as a malleable resource that populists merely 'hijack.'[14] Although leaders often exploit religious symbols for political gain, they or the populations they mobilize may already hold deep-seated religious commitments, transcendental worldviews, historical grievances, or cultural anxieties that make them receptive to populist messaging.[15] By pigeonholing religious populism into two modes, analyses can miss the reciprocal interplay between populist logic and public sentiment, as well as how religious traditions themselves are continuously reshaped through populist discourses.

Lastly, the two-dimensional model has difficulty accounting for the role of hybrid media in shaping religious populist expressions. It might treat overt and covert religiosity as spheres, but as scholars have highlighted, the media sphere itself can contextualize the relationship between religion and populism through forms of representation.[16] It can facilitate fluidity in which leaders can simultaneously broadcast pious invocations and strongly nationalist mythologies, adapting their message to different social media audiences in real-time. Conspiratorial narratives about threatening 'others' can be fused with explicit references to divine mandates or more implicit appeals to a sacralized national destiny.[17] The lines between overtly religious language and covert appropria-

13 Nandy, A. *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*. (Rutgers University Press, 2002); Joy, M. "Postcolonial Reflections: Challenges for Religious Studies." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 13, no. 2 (2001): 177–195.

14 Giorgi, A. "Hijack or Release? On the Heuristic Limits of the Frame of Instrumentalization of Religion for Discussing the Entanglements of Populism, Religion, and Gender." *Identities* 29, no. 4 (2022): 483–499; Marzouki, N., McDonnell, D., and Olivier, R., eds. *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion.* (London: C. Hurst, 2016).

15 Moffitt, B. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation.*) Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

16 Sumiala, J., Hoover, S. M., and Laughlin, C. "Global Populism: Its Roots in Media and Religion | Religious Populism? Rethinking Concepts and Consequences in a Hybrid Media Age – Introduction." *International Journal of Communication,* 17, 2023, 2795–2804.

17 Robertson, D. G., Asprem, E., and Dyrendal, A. "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion." In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion,* edited by Dyrendal, A., Robertson, D. G., and Asprem, E., 1–18. (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

tion of religious motifs often blur in the fast-paced, affect-driven milieu of social and digital communication.

Given these challenges, a growing number of scholars advocate a more expansive scheme to capture the manifold ways religion and populism intersect. One emerging approach differentiates *populism about religion, populism in religion,* and *populism as religion*.[18] Rather than anchoring the analysis in a two-dimensional continuum, this perspective posits that religious populism can be understood through a continuum of discourses, practices, and identifications: Populism about religion focuses on how populist actors target or manipulate 'other' religions. For instance, conspiratorial discourses portraying Islam (or other faiths) as an invasive threat belong here, along with the demonization of specific religious communities to bolster an "us vs. them" logic.[19] Populism in religion investigates how populist tendencies manifest *within* religious traditions themselves, where certain leaders or clerics position 'the people' against institutional hierarchies, presenting themselves as authentic guardians of religious truth. This mode involves reinterpreting doctrine to frame the populist movement as a crusade against corrupt religious elites. Finally, populism as religion examines how populist movements function quasi-religiously. These movements cultivate ritualistic practices, heroic mythologies, and moral absolutes that strongly resemble religious devotion. Instead of referencing a conventional theology, they generate a sacred aura around their cause, championing values and narratives with an intensity typically seen in formal religions.[20]

This tripartite model may still not capture every nuance – especially in hybrid media environment, where discursive forms rapidly evolve – but it does allow for a broader, more flexible mapping. It illuminates the *discursive elasticity* through which religion and populism intertwine. It also reminds us that religion can be constructed both from within (intra-religious populist mobilizations) and from without (exogenous narratives about 'other' religions), while also acknowledging that populism can become religious by adopting symbolic practices and emotional registers typically associated with it.

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18 Valaskivi, K., Sumiala, J., and Pyrhönen, N. "Conceptualizing Populism about/in/as Religion: Illustrations from the Nordic Media Sphere." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society,* 2, 2023, 69–80.

19 Brubaker, R. "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective." *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 40(8), 2017, 1191–1226; Haynes, J. "Right-Wing Populism and Religion in Europe and the USA." *Religions,* 11(10), 2020, 490.

20 DeHanas, D. N. "The Spirit of Populism: Sacred, Charismatic, Redemptive, and Apocalyptic Dimensions." *Democratization,* 31(4), 2024, 831–851.

In this special issue, we also situate religious populism in another tripartite model of religion to account for its deeper existential and sociocultural functions. Beyond political mobilization and discursive strategies, religious populism resonates with broader human desires for meaning, identity, and transcendence. This necessitates an exploration of religious populism through the lens of transcendence, a concept that captures how religious and quasi-religious narratives provide individuals and communities with a sense of purpose and orientation in an increasingly fragmented, anxiety-ridden world. By drawing on Thomas Luckmann's typology of transcendence,[21] we can better understand how religious populist movements reconfigure sacred traditions, cultural narratives, and personal spirituality to construct compelling visions of social and political renewal.

2 Transcendencies and Religious Populism: Bridging 'Little,' 'Intermediate,' and 'Great' Realms of the Sacred

Emerging from our broader discussion of religion and populism as discursive logics, this section foregrounds religious populism as a mode of meaning-making. Central to this perspective is Thomas Luckmann's contention that religion, at its core, entails human endeavors to rise above the everyday and forge systems of significance.[22] In *The Invisible Religion*, Luckmann maintains that religious phenomena are best understood not merely as institutional structures or doctrinal systems but rather as culturally embedded processes.[23] This enables individuals and communities to orient themselves toward transcendence i.e. the human capacity to 'reach beyond' the immediate experience to construct systems of meaning that ground both individual and collective life.[24] Although religion can manifest in diverse ways – ranging from highly institutionalized to deeply privatized – Luckmann's typology of 'great,' 'medium,' and 'mini' transcendencies helps clarify how religious meaning-making endures in modern contexts.[25]

21 Luckmann, T. "Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?" Sociological Analysis, 50(2), 1990, 127–138.

22 Luckmann, T. "Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?" *Sociological Analysis*, 50(2), 1990, 127–138.

23 Luckmann, T. *Invisible Religion.* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

24 Luckmann, T. *Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion*, Op.c.

25 Schütz, A., and Luckmann, T. *The Structures of the Life-World.* Translated by Zaner, R. M., and Engelhardt, H. T. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974).

Great transcendencies refer to the traditional, institutionalized forms of religion in earlier societies, where the sacred was centralized and tied to overarching frameworks of meaning. These forms were often mediated by powerful institutions, such as churches or temples, that governed both spiritual and societal life, uniting communities under shared moral and metaphysical systems. In contrast, modernity's fragmentation of traditional religious authority led to the emergence of what is termed 'mini-transcendencies.' This phase reflects the privatization and individualization of religion, characterized by personal spiritual practices and meaning-making without the mediation of institutionalized religion. In this context, individuals create their universes and sub-universes of meaning by drawing from diverse sources, including new-age spirituality, mindfulness practices, or even secular moral philosophies.[26] These mini-transcendencies align with the rise of secularism and the transforming role of institutional religion in governing societal norms and values. Yet religion did not disappear entirely from the public sphere; rather, it was reconfigured into intermediate forms.

Between these two extremes, 'medium-range transcendencies' emerged. This intermediary category parallels processes such as the separation of church and state, wherein religion ceased to be the sole sovereign over public life yet remained culturally and morally influential. As José Casanova has also argued, secularization in Europe and beyond often entailed the reconfiguration, rather than the disappearance, of religion.[27] Religion in this medium register found expression in forms of national mythologies, or collective moral frameworks or as exemplified by Robert Bellah's notion of *civil religion*.[28] Under these arrangements, the sacred was partially detached from older institutions yet continued to inform collective values, public rituals, and national identity.

Building on the concept of transcendence, religious populism can be read as a response to the crisis of meaning that arises when established religious or cultural narratives lose some of their binding force. In such disorienting circumstances, religion becomes a potent repository of collective meaning, enabling populist leaders to unify disparate groups around shared symbols, moral orders, and visions of societal renewal.[29] By bringing together three levels of transcendencies – great, medium, and mini transcendencies – *religious*

26 Berger, P. L., and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966).

27 Casanova, J. "Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization." *Sociology of Religion,* 62(4), 2001, 415–441.

28 Bellah, R. N. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus,* 96, 1967, 1–21.

29 Swatos, W. H. Jr. "Enchantment and Disenchantment in Modernity: The Significance of 'Religion' as a Sociological Category." *Sociological Analysis*, 44(4), 1983, 321–337.

populism fashions a political vision that appears at once expansive and intimate: it evokes the communal authority of grand religious traditions, accommodates the personalized spirituality of late-modern individualism, and galvanizes national or civic identity through medium-range transcendent symbols, from revered historical figures to national myths.

To this end, religious populist leaders do more than politicize or sacralize. They 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. This reconfiguration proceeds along several axes. First, they mythologize tradition, tying the present to sacred histories or divine covenants that both anchor collective memory and confer a transcendent mission. Second, they exalt charismatic leadership, portraying it as divinely mandated or morally pure, thus conflating religious and political authority. Third, they ritualize political life, fostering emotionally charged communal experiences reminiscent of religious ceremonies. These processes, in turn, help 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.'

On one hand, this process of sacralizing politics by recuperating and amalgamating fragments of religious culture is not unique to religious populism but is particularly prominent within it. By borrowing from the residues of traditional religious culture, religious populism transforms political movements into counter-societies that challenge secular frameworks. These movements often elevate their agendas above critique by imbuing them with moral and spiritual significance, creating what has been referred to as a form of political religion.[30] In this dynamic, the adjective *political* can become more significant than the noun religion as the religious elements within populist movements are not always theological or doctrinal. Instead, religion functions as a reservoir of powerful metaphors, moral binaries, and emotional resonance that amplify populist rhetoric.

Yet, the political dimension in religious populism does not simply supplement religious doctrine; rather, it often outweighs formal religious tenets by appropriating the emotional resonance and moral multitudes of religious culture. Through powerful metaphors and sacred imagery, populist movements transform political struggles into moral absolutes, imbuing their agendas with an aura of divine authority and framing opponents as existential threats. In so doing, religious populism redefines religious elements, underscoring

30 Burrin, P. "Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept." *History and Memory,* 9(1/2), 1997, 321–349.

its socio-cultural role in meeting collective needs for identity, unity, and meaning – needs intensified by contemporary cultural anxieties and mediated by hybrid media environments.

3 Religious Populist Communications in Hybrid Media

Religious populism, as explored in the previous section, operates not only as a political or cultural force but also as a mode of meaning-making that responds to crises of identity and belonging by offering transcendental frameworks. in today's digital age, the success and influence of religious populist movements are increasingly shaped by the hybrid media environment, which provides the technological infrastructure through which these transcendental narratives are communicated, reinforced, and contested. Hybrid media – characterized by the interplay between traditional and digital communication platforms – enables religious populist actors to amplify their messages, fostering a sense of collective identity that draws upon sacred histories, national mythologies, and personal spirituality.

Historically, religious movements have always relied on media to disseminate their messages and cultivate belonging. For instance, Horsfield analyzes the history of Christianity and media, illustrating how the populist trends of Protestantism co-evolved with the advancement of media technologies.[31] Missionary religions like Christianity have emphasized "spreading the good word (gospel)" to non-believers and wider society, aiming for conversion, salvation, and the reinforcement of collective belonging as the "chosen" people of God.[32] Religious texts and teachings have been communicated and disseminated through numerous media channels, evolving alongside technological advancements, from the printing press to radio, television, and beyond.

Today, these historical religious-populist practices find modern analogues, adapting to the hybrid media environments.[33] In hybrid media environments, the logic of older and newer media coexists and competes. Traditional media's hierarchical and editorial-controlled structures interact with digital media's participatory and decentralized nature, mutually shaping the flow of information and political discourse in contemporary society. Editorial

31 Horsfield, P. *From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media.* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

32 Valaskivi, K., Sumiala, J., & Pyrhönen, N. *Conceptualizing Populism about/in/as Religion*, Op.c.

33 Chadwick, A. *The hybrid media system*. Op.C.

gatekeeping, standard in traditional print and broadcast media, has become fragmented, enabling diverse actors – ranging from populist politicians and religious authorities to ordinary citizens – to set agendas and influence national public discourse.

Social media and online spaces provide new tools and affordances for religious populist actors, movements, and demands to communicate and disseminate their ideas and identities. For example, social media platforms serve as effective sites for populist politicians to build authenticity, sincerity, and a connection to "the people".[34] These platform communications are often perceived by the public as more authentic and trustworthy than mainstream media.[35] Additionally, hybrid media environments offer alternative spaces for reactionary and populist right-wing actors to create alternative knowledge authorities independent of, or even against the established mainstream experts and authorities.[36] Furthermore, the "attention factory"[37] logic of social media, designed to maximize the attention and reactions from users, frequently amplifies radical right-wing populist discourse and emotional, antagonistic communications that fuel emotional responses, garner greater user reactions, and generate profits The hybrid interplay between such alternative digital spaces and mainstream legacy media leads to the entrenchment of fringe or radical religious-populist voices to seep into national discourse and parliament agendas.[38]

The articles in this special issue explore religious populism in the hybrid media environment, with an emphasis on social media and online communications across a variety of socio-political and cultural contexts, including North America, Europe, and Asia. The religions addressed in these regional studies encompass Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Collectively, these

34 Zummo, M. L. "Performing Authenticity on a Digital Political Stage: Politainment as Interactive Practice and (Populist?) Performance." *Iperstoria,* 15, 2020.

35 Enli, G., and Rosenberg, L. T. "Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic." *Social Media + Society,* 4(1), 2018, 2056305118764430.

36 Hoover, S. M. "Religious Authority in the Media Age." In *The Media and Religious Authority,* 15–36, 2016; Lewis, R. *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube.* Data & Society, 2018, 1–60; Ylä-Anttila, T. "Populist Knowledge: 'Post-Truth' Repertoires of Contesting Epistemic Authorities." *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology,* 5(4), 2018, 356–388.

37 Valaskivi, K. "Circulation of Conspiracy Theories in the Attention Factory." *Popular Communication*, 20(3), 2022, 162–177.

38 Pyrhönen, N., and Bauvois, G. "Conspiracies Beyond Fake News: Produsing Reinformation on Presidential Elections in the Transnational Hybrid Media System." *Sociological Inquiry,* 90(4), 2020, 705–731; Schroeder, R. "Digital Media and the Entrenchment of Right-Wing Populist Agendas." *Social Media + Society,* 5(4), 2019, 2056305119885328.

papers illuminate how religion and populism converge globally and how religious populist actors and movements harness hybrid media to reimagine and reassert transcendental narratives in the digital age.

The articles are grouped into four sections. The first section explores religious populism in the context of Christianity in North America (the US) and Europe (Croatia), examining Protestant and Catholic populist dynamics. The second section analyzes religious populist discourses in Muslim-majority countries including Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Iraq. The third section interrogates religious populism and nationalist politics with a focus on Hinduism in the Indian context. Lastly, an afterword by Katja Valaskivi and Johanna Sumiala further explores the entanglement of religious populism and hybrid media in detail.

Dayei Oh's article "American abortion culture wars as religious populism: 'Truth' and 'fight for truth' as floating signifiers" examines the American abortion culture wars through the lens of religious populism, focusing on the discourse of the Christian pro-life confederation, Personhood Alliance. Using Laclaudian theories,[39] this paper conceptualizes culture wars as discursive and flexible meaning-making and analyzes how "truth" and "fight for truth" function as floating signifiers to build Us-Them boundaries, framing the movement as righteous truth-seekers fighting against a corrupt liberal establishment, inviting non-Christians to join the crusade. This contribution highlights how online websites and alternative platforms provide a controlled space for religious-populist culture warriors to construct and disseminate their core ideological narratives while circumventing platform governance.

Silvija Vuković and Nina Krapić's article, "A Populist, Influencer, and Religious Politician: A qualitative analysis of Marin Miletić's communication on Instagram during the Croatian election campaign" examines the communication strategy of Croatian politician Marin Miletic during the 2024 parliamentary election campaign, focusing on his blend of populism, influencer-style tactics, and Catholic religious themes. The paper analyses that Miletic, by using Instagram Stories, combines informal content, religious discourse, and anti-elitist rhetoric to connect emotionally with his followers. Vuković and Krapić's contribution in this special issue highlights the evolving dynamics of religious populist communications in hybrid media, where personal storytelling and community-building are central to engaging voters.

Yilmaz, Heupener, Morieson and Bliuc's article, "Disruptive Signification in a Hybrid Media Ecology: Civilisational Populism in Pakistan, Turkey and

39 Laclau, E. *On Populist Reason.* 2005.

Indonesia", examines the interplay between religion and populism in three Muslim-majority countries, using the ontic/ontological distinction to analyze how Islamic identity is mobilized within hybrid media systems through populist constructions of "the nation," "the people," and "civilization." Drawing on interviews with supporters for religious populist parties and movements, this paper explores how religious and civilizational themes are leveraged within a hybrid media ecology to mediatize and disrupt hegemonic political and social orders. Ultimately, Yilmaz and colleagues' contribution highlights the emotional and ideological underpinnings that enable religious populism to adapt across diverse cultural and political contexts.

Ali Alsayegh's article, "The Epistemic Modes of Muqtada al-Sadr's Charisma Production on Hybrid Media", examines the 'charisma' in the religious populism of Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadri movement in Iraq. Central to Alsayegh's analysis is the role of hybrid media, which he argues plays a crucial part in producing and reinforcing al-Sadr's charisma. Through 'epistemic modes' – disputes over which forms of knowledge are recognized as legitimate – the hybrid media ecosystem sustains the symbolic and emotional foundations of al-Sadr's leadership. Drawing on the framework of emotional entrepreneurism, Alsayegh conceptualizes charisma as an 'affective bond' between a leader and their followers. This bond is categorized into three core perceptions: legitimacy, hope, and authenticity, each of which underpins the trust followers place in their leader. The study also critiques traditional accounts of charisma for neglecting the interrelationship between emotional resonance and symbolic systems, particularly how these elements are validated through cultural and epistemic practices. By analyzing the structure of hybrid media content and its role in promoting al-Sadr's charismatic image, Alsayegh illuminates how religious populism operates as both a discursive system and a mode of meaning-making.

Feeza Vasudeva's article "Political Deification and Religious Populism in Modi's India" offers a conceptual contribution to the understanding of religious populism by examining the phenomena of political deification and populist darshan. Focusing on Narendra Modi's leadership in India, the article explains how political deification elevates charismatic figures to near-divine status, effectively reconfiguring political authority through sacred and moral frames. This transformation not only amplifies the leader's perceived legitimacy but also fosters a quasi-religious devotion among their followers. Central to this phenomenon is the concept of populist darshan, which describes how the mediated visibility of the leader – facilitated by the hybrid media environment – enables followers to virtually or symbolically 'witness' and engage with their deified leader. Employing an emic lens, the article illustrates

how these intertwined dynamics reflect a religious populism that extends beyond simple electoral calculations or superficial image-crafting. Instead, a populist leader's authority becomes embedded in culturally resonant narratives of transcendence and moral renewal – thereby reshaping political leadership in the public eye and challenging the conventional assumption of a strict separation between religion and politics.

In the Afterword, Katja Valaskivi and Johanna Sumiala situate hybrid media environments as *the* context for religious populism, underscoring how platform-based communication logics both enable and amplify populist religious imaginaries. They highlight three key consequences of mediatized religious populism: mythologization of the past and traditions, celebrity-like charisma performances of populist leaders, and mediatization of political life as rituals. Through hybrid mediatized religious populism, social imaginaries and discursive practices favor content addressing identity, ideology, and worldviews, which makes religious populism an especially lucrative mode of address. While the hybrid media system can create "bubbles" of like-minded individuals on the one hand, it also constantly exposes users to opposing positions on the other – leading to affective polarization. Consequently, individuals gravitate toward more rigid identity stances, with religious populist discourse further hardening divides between "us" and "them." Finally, they conclude the Afterword of this Special Issue by conceptualizing the discursive strategies of religious populism as the 'paradigmatic mode of address' in the hybrid media environment, raising two concerns. First, they highlight the escalation of societal polarization, distrust, hatred, and unrest, fueled by the communicative logics of hybrid media. Such processes, they caution, may endorse anti-democratic developments. Second, they emphasize "content confusion," a hallmark of hybrid media's tendency to blend categories – popular and fictional, spiritual and ritual, informational and factual – potentially unraveling shared foundations for public debate. This confusion, the scholars warn, could lead not just to democratic crises but to a fundamental rupture of epistemological underpinnings in our contemporary societies.

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