

Conference Report

BIRGIT MEYER & ANNELIES MOORS

Religion, Media and the Public Sphere

The international conference, jointly hosted by the ISIM and the Research Centre Religion and Society (ASSR), on 'Religion, Media and the Public Sphere' was held from 6 to 8 December 2001 at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The theme of the conference evolved out of three prominent debates in the 1990s: the crisis of the post-colonial nation-state, the increasing global proliferation of electronic media, and the rise of religious movements.

Taking as a point of departure that the nation-state no longer features as the privileged space for the imagination of community and identity, the conveners, Birgit Meyer (ASSR) and Annelies Moors (ISIM), proposed to focus on the ways in which religious groups make use of electronic media, thereby creating new intra- and transnational links between people, new expressions of public culture and new forms of publicness and publicity. Bringing together around twenty-five scholars (paper presenters and discussants) working on Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and 'indigenous religion', the conference addressed the articulated presence of religion in public on both an empirical and conceptual level. The central focus of debate comprised the transformations in the public sphere and the ways in which these relate to the proliferation of mass media and the liberalization of media policies, the upsurge of religion, and the crisis of the postcolonial state.

Right from the outset it became clear that while there is need for a conceptual space like the public sphere in order to grasp the marked articulation of religion in public, Habermas's notion of the public sphere is unsuited to capture the very complexity that was the theme of our conference. The need for a notion like the public sphere appeared to stem right from what participants encounter in their research practice: new

ways of bringing about links between people, of creating notions of self and Other, of imagining community. These are processes in which mass media appear to have crucial importance, because around them evolve alternative notions and possibilities of publicity and being a public or audience. Yet, certainly it is not useful to study, for instance, political Islam or Hindu nationalism from a perspective of Western, normative concepts, that is, from a view which regards the public presence of religion as a sign of the non-modern. Such a theoretical view fails to address the apparent messiness of the public sphere, the emergence of new forms of secrecy, the occurrence of violence, the politics of access and the ways in which this impinges on gender, or the crucial importance of capitalism and commercialization as a condition of the possibility for the public sphere. If anything, Habermas's model of shifting relations between economy, state and society at a certain point in European history is 'good to think with' in that it may help generate useful questions that ultimately lead beyond the model itself.

The conference was organized into seven sessions (publics and publicness; TV, consumption and religion; film, religion and the nation; media and religious authority; religion, politics and spectacle; media, religion and the politics of difference; and media, religion and morality). In order to get beyond existing universes of discourse and broaden discussions, all sessions brought together scholars working on different regions or religious traditions. Some papers looked close-

ly at how religions transform through adopting media, others investigated how media allow for the publication of religion outside the confines of churches, mosques, or cults, how religion merges with the forces of commercialization and is recast in terms of entertainment, or how the state (often vainly) seeks to control both media and religion. An important issue of debate pertained to the nexus of religion and media with respect to the relations between religious authority and believers. How do particular media technologies, such as radio or TV, impinge on the ways in which religions shape believers' bodies and senses? In how far does mediation threaten or change existing forms of religious authority? How do religious constructions of the subject rub against or clash with new ways of being an audience? What does this mean for gender relations? Another important theme concerned the complicated relationship between the state, citizenship and global discourses on human rights and related issues in the field of gender, religion and identity. Central issues of debate here were the politics of mediations and the ways in which processes of inclusion and exclusion work in both secular and religious discourses. As the conference was extremely stimulating, the conveners will work on publishing a selection of the papers in an edited volume.

Conveners:

- Birgit Meyer (*University of Amsterdam*)
- Annelies Moors (*ISIM*)

Participants:

- Rachel Dwyer (*University of London*)
- Walter Armbrust (*Oxford University*)
- David Morgan (*Valparaiso University*)
- Jeremy Stolow (*Cambridge University*)
- Dale F. Eickelman (*Dartmouth College*)
- Faye Ginsburg (*New York University*)
- Patricia Spyer (*Leiden University*)
- Charles Hirschkind (*New York University*)
- Rosalind I. J. Hackett (*University of Tennessee*)
- Ayşe Öncü (*Bogazici University*)
- David Lehman (*Cambridge University*)
- Patricia Birman (*State University of Rio de Janeiro*)
- Dorothea Schulz (*University of Chicago*)
- Batia Siebzehner (*Hebrew University*)
- Sudeep Dasgupta (*University of Amsterdam*)
- Brian Larkin (*University of Amsterdam*)
- Meg McLagan (*University of Amsterdam*)
- Rafael Sánchez (*University of Amsterdam*)
- Peter van der Veer (*ISIM/University of Amsterdam*)
- Oskar Verkaaik (*University of Amsterdam*)
- Peter van Rooden (*University of Amsterdam*)
- Michael Gilson (*New York University/ISIM*)
- Mona Abaza (*American University of Cairo/IAS*)
- Mattijs van de Port (*University of Amsterdam*)