



EDITORIAL

Majority/Minority Dichotomy in Religions: Theoretical Reflections and Social Practices

Today, religions in most countries in the world are involved in political activities, directly or indirectly influencing citizens' perceptions of state legitimacy. In actively investigating alternative strategies for maintaining their media presence, religions enthusiastically adopt electronic and digital media technologies, thereby reconfiguring traditional practices of religious mediation. While approaches to teaching religion in public schools and higher educational institutions can take various forms, the increased involvement of religion in the public sphere can be understood in the context of ongoing changes in value systems. This indicates the importance of placing appropriate emphasis on the agency of religious interest groups from both conceptual and empirical perspectives. The respective role of various religions in public spaces is highly dependent on the historical-cultural background of the particular religion in the given state (although this can change over time); moreover, a religion that is considered to be in the majority in one setting, could be a minority in another, and vice versa. Thus, the question facing contemporary research into religion and society includes a consideration of how the new situation should be understood, studied and analysed.

Generally speaking, relations between religious majorities and minorities, which form the major focus of the current issue of *Changing Societies & Personalities*, depend on the socio-historical context of a particular country. No agreement has so far been reached among scholars concerning the definition of majority/minority. In this respect, various aspects of the problem have been considered, including size, minority-to-majority ratio, objective and subjective criteria, minorities' origin and nationality. Some scholars argue that the very distinction between majority and minority almost automatically imports discrimination, thus leading to disadvantaging certain actors in the public sphere. Indeed, distinguishing groups, which are dangerous to a society and should be subject to state control, is an incredibly challenging task. In addition, the historical majority/minority ratio depends on migration processes, i.e. on the global expansion of religions from those countries, in which they constitute the majority religion, to nations, in which they become one of the many minority religions. At the same time, immigrant groups that are religious minorities in their countries of

origin become part of the religious mainstream in their host countries. The freedom of religion asserted in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has always been central to minority rights. Minority rights have been at the root of the development of modern human rights mechanisms; however, they remain contested and frequently ignored. How should a democratic state engage in the protection of minority rights, and what role does historical legacy and tradition play in this process? This is a theme for ongoing academic discussions partly reflected in the current issue of the Journal.

Relations between majority and minority religions are investigated in various fields of social sciences and humanities, such as Religious Studies, Cultural Studies, Political Philosophy, Social Theory, History, etc. On the one hand, scholars approach this problem by emphasizing the necessity to organize a dialogue between majority and minority religions. On the other hand, it is still not quite clear what majority and minority means with respect to religion. The animosity stemming from identification with majority or minority continues to persist in the particular society; nevertheless, the terms “majority/minority” should be understood in quantitative, rather than ecclesiological terms. Surely, the number of adherents does not affect the ecclesiological quality of a community. Therefore, this number should not be the reason for privileging or disadvantaging any confession by the state, and confessions should recognize that their increased number is nothing else by their increased obligation. Majority and minority religions should seek peaceful coexistence, better knowledge and understanding of each other, as well as strive to overcome biases, stereotypes and suspicions inherited from the past.

The present issue of *Changing Societies & Personalities* seeks to elucidate the majority/minority dichotomy from various perspectives: human rights; toleration and recognition; political discourse on religion; the design of religious education at school, etc. In the article *Religious Freedom in Flux: The European Court of Human Rights Grapples with Ethnic, Cultural, Religious, and Legal Pluralism*, James T. Richardson examines the practice of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which acts according to the “European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” signed by all original members of the Council of Europe. In particular, Richardson concentrates on the cases of violation of religious freedom and rights of religious minorities. He notes that, in spite of the pledge of member states to abide by the Convention, which also means that the government in question “is expected to modify its laws to comport with Convention values and rulings of the Court”, there is a growing number of member states refusing to implement the Court’s decisions, including major decisions concerning religious freedom. Richardson examines some recent ECtHR cases in the area of religion to show that these cases could be interpreted as evidence of the efforts made by the Court to accommodate the ethnic, religious, cultural and legal pluralism that exists within the Council of Europe.

Aleksei V. Loginov in his article *Second-Order Arguments, or Do We Still Need Tolerance in the Public Sphere?* raises the question of why toleration becomes so difficult in matters concerning religion. In his view, most of the conflicts today involve some kind of reference to a certain religion; thus, “the growing number of religious conflicts makes it pertinent for political and social theory to revise the already existing

instruments of analysis and to develop new ones for efficient peacemaking and peacekeeping in such situations”. Loginov observes various argumentation lines concerning the possibility/impossibility of religious toleration and demonstrates their advantages and shortcomings.

Tim Jensen in the article *From Respected Religion Scholar Expert to Cartoon Character: Reflections in the Wake of the Danish Muhammad Cartoon Crisis and Three Decades as Expert to the Media*, reflects upon the public role of a Religious Studies scholar, who upholds the scientific approach to religion. Jensen observes his own role(s) in the heated debates pertaining to the Muhammad cartoons, which took place in Denmark in 2005–2007. These debates are ongoing, often including issues pertaining to the refugees from Muslim countries. One side of the debaters argued that cartoons published in the popular daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* were part of the campaign of political and cultural hegemony directed against Islam and Muslims as minority; the opposite side expressed concern that the freedom of expression was under siege. While stressing his credo as “promoting the scientific study of religion, its approaches and the knowledge accumulated, on the one hand, and the secular, democratic, pluralistic society and public space that would not function if it did not give room to both the science of religion and religion”, Jensen also demonstrates the complexities, with which a Religious Studies scholar is faced due to the specifics of mass media coverage of religious topics. At the same time, Jensen urges scholars to provide in public debates “not just brief and accurate information, but also qualified and controversial opinions”.

In the article *The Norwegian Political Discourse on Prohibiting Muslim Garments. An Analysis of Four Cases in the Period 2008–2018*, Bengt-Ove Andreassen illustrates how public debates influenced decisions and political propositions in the Norwegian parliament concerning such garments as the *hijab*, *niqab*, and *burqa* with a special stress on the Norwegian state’s obligations regarding basic human rights. The political negotiations concerning Islam in Norway are quite typical for many European countries, in which Islam has recently become not only a visible, but also a highly contested and debated religion. Andreassen analyses the provisions of the Norwegian Constitution, which specifies that all “religious communities should be supported on equal terms”. Nevertheless, historical prejudices and stereotypes are still affecting the perception of Islam in Norway. Public debates are largely revolving around issues pertaining to the compatibility of Islam with democracy and “Western values” with a particular stress on clothing such as the *hijab*, *niqab*, and *burqa*. In exploring several cases concerning Muslim garments in public places, Andreassen demonstrates the importance of using secular argumentation in public debates on religious issues.

Olga A. Iakimova and Andrey S. Menshikov in their article *Religious Education in Russian Schools: Plans, Pains, Practices*, observe the six-module course “Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” (FRCSE) having been taught in Russian schools since 2012 in the light of the international debate on religious education. The authors seek to compare the Russian experience with the generally accepted typology, which distinguishes between (a) “learning into religion” (monoreligious model), (b) “learning about religion” (multireligious model) and

(c) “learning from religion” (interreligious model). A mention is made that “despite the importance of global trends and international debates, it is crucial to observe the local dynamics and discover how particular conceptualizations of religion, education goals, principles and teaching practices affect religion education and its development”. In this respect, the authors focus on the religious education in the Sverdlovsk region questioning whether there are specific regional trends in the selection of FRCSE modules.

Sergei V. Sokolov in the article *Between Barbarism and Progress: Enlightenment Historical Writings on a Major Conflict in Russian History*, takes a historical approach in studying divergent opinions on Russian society in the light of the concept of the change from barbarism to civilization. In particular, various controversies of such a change are examined. He mentions stereotypes about Russia as a barbarian country, which have been common across Europe since the 16th century, and stresses that the discourse of “barbarism” compared to the “civilization” (“progress”) of Europe had different meanings in different times in the writings of both Russian and Western authors. Concerning the Christianization of Russia, Sokolov underlines that, from the point of view of Russian historians, enlightenment by means of baptism was not equal to the European Enlightenment of the 18th century; rather, “baptism was considered a step to enlightenment, the beginning of a long path”. According to Sokolov, such an interpretation agrees well with the position of most European writers, who have never disputed the significance and great influence of religion over European history. It is emphasized that the real picture of the Enlightenment’s attitude towards religion was quite complex. In addition, Sokolov analyses the discussion between Russian and European authors concerning the impact of the Scandinavian invasion at the beginning of Russian history in the context of the barbarism/civilization dichotomy.

Thus, the current issue of *Changing Societies & Personalities* is focused on the analysis of the role played by religions (both majority and minority groups) in history and in the contemporary world. Today, religion is increasingly being acknowledged as an important aspect of national and international politics, a pervasive and contentious cultural force, as well as a subject of significant public concern. All respective issues require extensive scholarly research and thoughtful conversations both within and outside academia to reach a wider public.

Discussions around the topics raised in the present issue will be continued in the subsequent issues of our Journal. In planning to introduce new interesting themes, we welcome suggestions from our readers and prospective authors for thematic issues, debate sections or book reviews.

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