



Rethinking Public Religion
in Africa and South Asia

WORD, IMAGE, SOUND

Columbia University
April 4th and 5th, 2019

The Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life

Sponsored by the Henry R. Luce Foundation

Thursday, April 4th

Barnard Center for Research on Women
Milstein Center, 6th Floor

9:30am – 10:00am ~ Matthew Engelke, Columbia University
Introductory Remarks

10:00am – 11:15am ~ Naomi Haynes, University of Edinburgh
*Concretizing the Christian Nation: Negotiating Zambia's
National House of Prayer*
Responds: Anand Vivek Taneja

11:15am – 11:30am ~ Coffee Break

11:15am – 12:30pm ~ Yasmin Moll, University of Michigan
*Televised Tears, Sincerity and Artifice in the Egyptian Islamic
Revival*
Responds: Jeremy Dell

12:30pm – 2:00pm ~ Lunch

2:00pm – 3:15pm ~ Arsalan Khan, Union College
*Mediation, Leniency and the Shifting Boundaries of the
Religious in the Tablighi Jamaat in Pakistan*
Responds: Naomi Haynes

3:15pm – 3:30pm ~ Coffee Break

3:30pm – 4:45pm ~ Michael Edwards, London School of Economics
*Sense and Censorship: Translating Salvation in Transitioning
Myanmar*
Responds: Yasmin Moll

4:45pm – 6:00pm ~ Mohamed Amer Meziane, Columbia University
On Voice and Gesture
Responds: Amanda Weidman

Friday, April 5th

Barnard Center for Research on Women
Milstein Center, 6th Floor

10:00am – 11:15am ~ Amanda Weidman, Bryn Mawr College
Ambiguities of Animation: On Being “Just the Voice”
Responds: Andrea Mariko Grant

11:15am – 11:30am ~ Coffee Break

11:15am – 12:30pm ~ Andrea Mariko Grant, Cambridge University
Public Religion after Genocide: Dangerous Sounds and Pentecostals in Rwanda
Responds: Michael Edwards

12:30pm – 2:00pm ~ Lunch

2:00pm – 3:15pm ~ Anand Vivek Taneja, Vanderbilt University
Urdu Poetry in Contemporary India: An Islamic Language for “Indian Secularism”?
Responds: Mohamed Amer Meziane

3:15pm – 3:30pm ~ Coffee Break

3:30pm – 4:45pm ~ Jeremy Dell, Dartmouth College
Odes to Noise: Religious Poetry and the Politics of Sound in 20th-Century Senegal
Responds: Arsalan Khan

4:45pm – 5:00pm ~ Coffee Break

5:00pm – 6:00pm ~ Matthew Engelke and Katherine Ewing,
Columbia University

Wrap-up Discussion

Abstracts

Naomi Haynes

Concretizing the Christian Nation: Negotiating Zambia's National House of Prayer

Since 2016, members of the Zambian public, particularly church leaders, have been presented with a range of images of the country's planned National House of Prayer. These architectural renderings depict a structure of unprecedented size and scope, capable of accommodating more people than any other religious building in Zambia. The House of Prayer's seating capacity indexes the expectation on the part of its designers that the building will foster unity among Christians – and therefore among most Zambians. However, a closer look at the different sets of plans for the House of Prayer reveals the difficulties involved in creating a religious space in which all Christians feel equally comfortable. The National House of Prayer therefore sheds light on the central challenge of liberalism and allows us to explore the internal contradictions of the liberal tradition from the unique perspective of Africa's only self-proclaimed "Christian nation."

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Yasmin Moll

Televised Tears, Sincerity and Artifice in the Egyptian Islamic Revival

There is an authoritative Islamic tradition of feigning weeping (*tabbaki*) in devotional contexts, including in hortatory preaching. This practice, one closely associated in contemporary Egypt with Islamic Revivalism, is an expression of pious humility through which pietists pretend to cry in order to (ideally) develop the embodied capacity to shed real tears in the future. Secular Egyptians tend to dismiss such weeping as insincere, but so, too, do revivalists in a specific context: on-camera weeping. Drawing on fieldwork with Islamic television preachers and their followers in Cairo, this presentation explores how the latter approach televised tears as an object of critical appraisal and deliberation on piety and its modes of going public more broadly. How does the mass mediation of preacherly weeping – and the aestheticization of such weeping through a variety of televisual techniques – create the conditions of possibility for new expressions of religious ambivalence and skepticism about old religious practices? How do Islamic television preachers and their media producers negotiate these off-screen critiques in their own on-screen staging of pious affect? What can televised tears reveal about the mass

mediation of sincerity and artifice in Egypt's contested (and crowded) religious field?

~

Arsalan Khan

Mediation, Leniency and the Shifting Boundaries of the Religious in the Tablighi Jamaat in Pakistan

Pakistani Tablighis, practitioners of the transnational Islamic piety movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, can be seen traveling through Pakistan's villages, towns and cities, preaching the importance of Islamic practice to fellow Muslims. Tablighis practice a distinct, ritualized form of face-to-face preaching (*dawat*) that they claim is modeled on the Prophet's way and therefore uniquely efficacious in spreading Islamic virtue, knowledge and affect. Tablighis, however, say that *dawat* can be combined with other practices as long as they are within the boundaries defined by scripture. In this paper, I use the Tablighi engagement with a genre of Sufi devotional song in praise of the Prophet (*naat*) to understand how Tablighis define the boundaries of "correct" religion (*din*). While Tablighis are adamantly opposed to many Sufi practices, particularly those connected to the intercessory powers of saints, they say that *naat* are an acceptable and canonical means for drawing a person closer to God. Yet, *naat* also carry the danger of leading Muslims away from religion. I argue that the ambivalence evoked by *naat* reflects a deeper tension between immediacy and mediation that runs through Tablighi ritual life (Engelke 2007; Eisenlohr 2018). This tension, I show, shapes Tablighi efforts to purify Islam, a phenomenon with considerable sectarian implications in the plural religious landscape of Pakistan.

~

Michael Edwards

Sense and Censorship: Translating Salvation in Transitioning Myanmar

Recent reforms in Myanmar afford new opportunities for local Christians to share the gospel with Buddhists. By distributing tracts on footpaths and preaching next to pagodas, they enter into a public sphere emerging from five decades of censorship and military rule. This is a time, they say, when God is saving Myanmar: rescuing the country from the junta and bringing its Buddhist majority to Christ. But as much as they figure this as a moment of rupture, they also see signs of continuity: ongoing suppression of dissent; a crony class entrenching its power; and an intensifying Buddhist nationalism that

casts other religions as 'foreign'. This paper explores how evangelists navigate this moment through a focus on the tracts they distribute. I situate their use as the latest exchange in a long conversation between Christianity and Buddhism, one beginning with nineteenth-century missionary efforts to translate Christian concepts into Burmese, and including ongoing state attempts to regulate the use of Buddhist terms by other religions. Navigating this linguistic terrain, I argue, entails confronting a problem of commensuration: How to foreground the commensurability of Christianity and Buddhism in such a way that downplays the gospel's foreignness while retaining its transformative incommensurability?

~

Mohamed Amer Meziane
On Voice and Gesture

The paper will examine: a) how vocality has been conceived through a hierarchy between chant and speech among orientalist and africanists; and b) how this hierarchy might be challenged. The first part of the chapter will analyze the different trajectories of the concept of enchantment and its link to notions of African religion, chant and primitiveness during the nineteenth century. The second part will analyze how this logic of enchantment is still presupposed by philosophers and theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida or Michel Bernard in their conceptualizations of the voice. Drawing on performance studies and anthropology, the paper will try to construct alternative concepts for the analysis of vocality in its relation both to religious practices of recitation and to artistic practices of performance.

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Amanda Weidman
Ambiguities of Animation: On Being "Just the Voice"

Playback singers, so named because their voices are first recorded in the studio and then "played back" on the set to be matched with actors' bodies and other visual images in song sequences, are an integral part of Indian popular cinema and the culture industry that springs from it. This paper explores the affordances of this division of labor between acting and singing for women in the South Indian Tamil film industry in the 1950s and 60s. Playback presented the opportunity for women to participate in the film industry without appearing on screen, thereby lending a degree of respectability to cinema. The assumed immorality of an actress displaying her body on screen was mitigated by the assumed moral rectitude of a woman singing behind it.

But playback singers were not anonymous “behind the scenes” voices; they were celebrities whose voices were immediately recognizable and linked to their name. Every onscreen appearance thus activated two star texts: that of the actor or actress, and that of the playback singer. For female singers who came of age in this period, stage performance was a crucial opportunity to link their voice to their own name and persona, and thus to distinguish themselves from the onscreen actress. At the same time, ideals of female modesty required that singers take their bodies out of the equation as much as possible. This led to a mode of performance that cultivated non-glamorous appearance, bodily stillness while singing, and an avoidance of interaction with the audience; the ideal in performance was to imitate as closely as possible the more controlled act of recording one’s voice in the studio. This paper will explore the technologies, media, and semiotic ideologies that made possible this form of celebrity, its attendant forms of publicity, and the tensions and structural contradictions generated by the idea of being “just the voice.”

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Andrea Mariko Grant

Public Religion after Genocide: Dangerous Sounds and Pentecostals in Rwanda

This paper examines the cleavages between secular and gospel music in contemporary Rwanda. I explore how Pentecostal gospel singers were heavily criticised for crossing over into secular music after they had begun their careers in the church. Since music – particularly praise and worship music (known in Kinyarwanda as *guhimbaza Imana*) – was understood as a form of ‘transportation’ or mediation between individuals and the divine, Christian singers who then used it to transmit secular messages risked damaging not only their own relationship with God, but the relationship between God and a wider public. Interestingly, however, Christian filmmakers who dreamed of making secular films did not face similar criticisms.

While anthropologists of sub-Saharan Africa have pointed out that the instability of Pentecostal images gives rise to anxieties that they might harbour demonic presences, I suggest we must also be attendant to the instability of Pentecostal sounds, and how the materiality of sound means that they can equally become co-opted by malevolent forces. That certain sounds can be dangerous is increasingly a concern for the Rwandan state: since 2014 there has been widespread crackdown on ‘noise pollution’ in the capital Kigali, culminating with the closure of more than 700 churches in 2018.

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Anand Vivek Taneja

Urdu Poetry in Contemporary India: An Islamic Language for “Indian Secularism”?

How do we think with poetry as a part of the public life of the Islamic discursive tradition? How do we think with poetry as the public life of the Islamic discursive tradition when it is increasingly audible and legible to people who are, by our usual ways of understanding things, outside the boundaries of Muslim identity? I believe that the Urdu poetic tradition in India does the work of creating a growing public sphere, circumscribed by linguistic affinity rather than religious identity, which posits alternate ways of imagining the relation of the citizen or *shehri* —in the dual sense of both the rights bearing citizen of legal discourse *and* dweller in the city who is the subject of poetic discourse—to the majoritarian moral norms which have the force of law in post-colonial India. I argue that Urdu poetry creates a shared Islamic ground for thought, affect and ethics for poets and audiences across the divides of class, sect, technological literacy, theological orientation, and religious identity. Or in other words, Urdu poetry creates an Islamic language for “Indian secularism.”

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Jeremy Dell

Odes to Noise: Religious Poetry and the Politics of Sound in 20th-Century Senegal

Sound control policies already had a long history in the French-controlled settlements of the Senegalese coast by the time the prefect of Dakar issued a decree in 1953 prohibiting the use of loudspeakers on public roads and in the open-air courtyards of private residences. Such policies were intended to silence what French administrators referred to as “*chants religieux*,” or the nighttime recitation by Sufi disciples of poems known in Wolof as *xasida*. Derived from the Arabic term for “ode” (*qaṣīda*), such poems formed a key component of the liturgy of Senegal’s expanding Sufi orders. The first Senegalese-owned printing presses, meanwhile, began disseminating *xasida* in printed form more widely than ever, and at times against the wishes of the Sufi leadership. This paper shows the intertwined nature of print, public recitation and sound control in mid-century Senegal, and seeks to illuminate the institutional contexts that shape the production of Islamic scholarship as well as the wider social impact of specific scholarly genres.

Biographies

Jeremy Dell is a scholar of African history and the Modern Intellectual History (MIH) Postdoctoral Fellow at Dartmouth College. His research focuses on West Africa's Muslim intellectual traditions, with interests in the intersecting histories of Sufism, Islamic law and the global history of the book. His current book project, *Saving Tradition: Archiving Islam in the Western Sahel*, explores the history of collecting and preserving Arabic manuscripts amidst social and political upheaval in the West African countries of Senegal and Mali. Dr. Dell earned his doctorate in History at the University of Pennsylvania. His research has been supported by the Social Science Research Council, Fulbright Foundation, and the US Department of Education. He teaches courses in all eras of African history and currently serves as Managing Editor of the journal *Modern Intellectual History* (@MIHJournal).

Michael Edwards is an anthropologist working on questions of religion, media, and democracy. He was awarded his PhD from the London School of Economics in 2019, and received his previous degrees from Oxford and Sydney University. His current book project is a study of the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism in the context of Myanmar's fraught democratic transition. His next project is a multi-sited study of the Zomi diaspora and associated Christian networks across three settings: Myanmar's Chin State, Kuala Lumpur, and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Andrea Mariko Grant is a lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Her work focuses on contemporary Rwanda and is interested in exploring everyday urban life in the country amidst significant social, political, and economic transformations. Her PhD research considered youth, Pentecostalism, and popular culture while her most recent project is concerned with memory, heritage, and archival processes.

Naomi Haynes is a lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include Christianity, political economy, exchange, gender, and value. Her monograph, *Moving by the Spirit*, explores the social life of Pentecostal congregations on the Zambia Copperbelt, paying special attention to the opportunities and problems created by spiritual patronage. Haynes has recently begun a new ESRC-funded research that brings together political philosophy, media studies, and ethnography to explore Zambia's constitutional declaration that it is a "Christian nation."

Arsalan Khan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Union College in Schenectady, NY. His research is situated at the intersection of semiotics, ritual, value and ethics, themes that he explores in the context of the Islamic revival in Pakistan. Through an examination of the transnational Islamic piety movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, in Pakistan, his research explores the broader relationship between Islam, secularism and modernity.

Mohamed Amer Meziane is a philosopher and postdoctoral research fellow at IRCPL. He is also a research associate at the Sorbonne Institute for Law and Philosophy and a member of the board of the CNRS-based Research Network *Islam et chercheurs dans la Cité*, in which he holds a seminar series on secularism and public religion. His new research project analyzes the ways in which these imperial transformations are challenged within African spaces. The project questions the boundaries of Africa and the Middle East through the religious, racializing and ecological effects of political geographies. The aim of this project is to try and unfold the contemporary stakes of a systematic critique of these geographies for African theory, from Fanon until today.

Yasmin Moll is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan. She is currently completing a book about Islamic television preaching in revolutionary Egypt. She holds a PhD in anthropology from New York University, where she also trained in ethnographic filmmaking.

Anand Vivek Taneja is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. He studied at Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, and Columbia University, where he received his PhD in Anthropology. He is the author of *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford University Press, 2017). His research and teaching interests include urban ecology, everyday ethics and political theologies, historical and contemporary Islam and inter-faith relations in South Asia, Urdu poetry, and Bombay cinema.

Amanda Weidman is a cultural anthropologist with interests in music, sound, media, performance, linguistic anthropology, semiotics, and technological mediation. Within South Asia, her research focuses on Tamil-speaking South India. She is currently at work on a book project on playback singing in Indian cinema, a system where singers' voices are first recorded in the studio and then "played back" on the set to be matched with actors' bodies and other visual images

in song sequences. This project situates the new forms of vocal sound and performance practice, celebrity and publicity, and affective attachment to voices that have been generated by this division of labor between voice and body, singing and acting, within the cultural and political context of South India from the late 1940s to the present.

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Matthew Engelke is the Director of the Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life and Professor in the Department of Religion. He is an anthropologist with research interests in Christianity, secular humanism, media, materiality, semiotics. He has conducted fieldwork in Zimbabwe and in Britain. He is currently working on a book about secularity and death, based on research among humanist funeral celebrants in London. Before joining the Columbia faculty in 2018, Prof. Engelke taught in the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science for 16 years. He received his BA from the University of Chicago in 1994 and his PhD from the University of Virginia in 2002.

Katherine Pratt Ewing, Professor of Religion at Columbia University, is also Coordinator of the Master of Arts Program in the South Asia Institute. Her research ranges from debates among Muslims about the proper practice of Islam in the modern world to sexualities, gender, and the body in South Asia. She has done ethnographic fieldwork in Pakistan, Turkey and India, and among Muslims in Germany, The Netherlands, and the United States. Prof. Ewing received her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Chicago. Her books include *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis and Islam* (1997) and *Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin* (2008), among others.



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IN AFRICA AND SOUTH ASIA



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