
Introduction

The Borders of Religion

This volume of *Religion and Society* is marked by borders, boundaries, and limits. The borders here are those that make religion operative and politically powerful, as well as those that are enabled and put into place by religious arguments and worldviews. All these dimensions of borders are included in the special section of this volume, coordinated by Valentina Napolitano and Nurit Stadler, entitled “Borderlands and Religion: Materialities, Histories, and the Spatialization of State Sovereignty.” The section includes articles by Alejandro Lugo, Nurit Stadler and Nimrod Luz, Alberto Hernández and Amalia Campos-Delgado, and Alexander D. M. Henley. They dwell upon two of the most notorious and contentious borders in the world: the one that separates Lebanon and Palestine from Israel, and the one that separates the US from Mexico. Both Israel and the US are known for their fenced and walled frontier politics. From these contributions, we learn how borderlands and their religious framing become spaces of political negotiation by affirmation and/or by exclusion: they determine sovereignty, ontology, history.

But this volume is also about boundaries that people build up, leading us to question when religion ‘ceases’ to be religion alone and starts to become something else that can be characterized by other adjectives: fundamentalist, intolerant, controversial. Our debate section, composed of reactions to the *Charlie Hebdo* events, looks at a specific case where such boundaries have emerged. Ghassan Hage, in a very immediate and personal response, dismantles the alleged secularist virtue of satire and questions whether intolerance is in fact located at the heart of the enterprise. The contribution by Jane Garnett and Sondra L. Hausner raises another important issue: what kinds of articulations of solidarity are at stake in political reactions to religious violence (in Paris as in Copenhagen), and who or what is left out of such declarations? Faisal Devji, in turn, tackles the problem of ‘free’ versus ‘fearless’ speech and questions, through the invocation of a longer history of blasphemy, the conventions that shape the boundaries between these forms of expression.

Borders are also implicit throughout the work of Ann Taves, who is the subject of our portrait section in this volume. Her research has provided diverse and yet unique ways of approaching and thinking about religion from the viewpoint of experience and devotion, allowing for an open-ended interrogation of ‘religion’ as an object. In these pursuits, Taves has never been too interested in respecting disciplinary borders; instead, she has chosen to work in and throughout transdisciplinary territory and across domains that are often placed outside religion, such as science. She has given us perspectives on what she calls, in her own reflection for this portrait, ‘weird experiences’ and ‘revelatory events’, as well as on the ‘special’ and ‘non-ordinary’ moments of religious life. The authors who contribute to this portrait—Richard Sosis, Thomas J. Coleman III and Ralph Wood Jr., and Gustavo Benavides—show us precisely how Taves’s approach has impacted scholars working on religion with very different disciplinary heuristics, from psychology and religious studies to anthropology.



Our articles section explores borders in different terms. Ashley B. Lebner examines the ‘other side’ of secularism, what lies beyond the hegemonic conceptions that tie it into problems of governance and politics. She proposes that, in order to avoid redundancy and self-determination, anthropologists of secularism must denaturalize the religious versus secular divide and move toward understandings of secularity as a condition and experience instead of a mere political process. Michael W. Scott offers us a view on cosmogony and its role today, especially concerning its invocation in places such as the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) experiments at CERN, popular fiction, and Christian blogging. But Scott also addresses what he refers to as the ‘necessity’ of counter-cosmogonical models. Here, he takes the opportunity to question the active role played by anthropology in the process. Evandro Bonfim analyzes the limits of knowledge and the operativeness of incomprehension in religious ritual by focusing on glossolalia as an ineffable dimension of the Christian charismatic experience. Through his work with the *Canção Nova* community in Brazil, he suggests that this iconic communication produces specific notions of ritual effectiveness, personhood, and ideologies of community. Marc Verhoeven exposes boundaries—both material and temporal—within the emergence of the sub-discipline of the archaeology of ritual and religion. In describing the evolution of this field of inquiry, he unveils the limits and potentialities of the archaeological record in the study of religion: What kind of framing is involved? What kind of materials can be considered ‘religious’?

We do not expect the work on borders and boundaries in this volume to produce or convey a ‘definitive’ definition of religion. Ours is too multifaceted a field for such narrow tropes. Instead, we hope it can remind us of how challenging and stimulating the study of religion and society can be.

Ruy Llera Blanes, Simon Coleman, and Sondra L. Hausner



Ann Taves