Preface

This volume is an attempt to dispute a major premise of the Enlightenment as the foundation for modernity and modernization, the one stating that religion—and the many manifestations of the religious—should be relegated to the private sphere. Having as its main endeavors the achievement of progress, equality, and freedom as “modern ideals,” the rational project of modernization is meant above all as a break with the chains of tradition. Religion was, according to this view, the most important and reactionary manifestation of the “old traditional order.” Western democracies, in some cases within the republican design, in some others in the context of constitutional monarchies, created different legal and institutional frameworks in order to limit the influence of religion. Ideals such as religious tolerance, the dominance of the secular in the public affairs, or the religious neutrality of the state were codified and enforced with different levels of success. Moreover, the ideology of development, as a post-colonial vision imposed by Western powers to the “developing” countries, proposed the same recipe of modernization trying to exclude or diminish the role of religion in those societies. However, the “secular illusion” suffered a big blow when religions and the religious re-entered the public sphere in what Kepel (1991) has called “the revenge of God” (la revanche de Dieu), as a way to characterize the re-emergence of different fundamentalisms that begun in the mid-1970s.

Religions, and the cultural expressions around and about the religious, are back in the center stage of the world. Both the Western and non-Western societies have been facing for more than 50 years the tensions of that return, almost as a comeback of the repressed, in Freudian terms. The globalized network of media, migration flows, and commercial and cultural exchanges have contributed to put religion on the frontline. In certain cases, the projected image of religion is brutal and violent, not exempted from prejudices and stereotypes. In other occasions, religion is associated with transformation, healing, and even hope, in societies where a technocratic rationality has been voided of morality or ethical boundaries. Whether in its more negative or positive representations, religion does have a growing presence in the public sphere, making more difficult to accomplish the “enlightened prescription” of keeping it private.

This disrupting return of religion creates new problems, or brings back old problems, in societies—particularly the Western democracies—that believed themselves to have attained the hegemony of the secular. At the macro level, from the perspective of global geopolitics, the tensions and conflicts derived from this comeback have been described in the logic of extreme polarization as the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1997) or the duality “Jihad vs. McWorld” (Barber, 1996). Besides the criticism that one can make of these oversimplified and exclusive interpretations of complex and varied phenomena, it is clear that the “religion variable” has replaced in some contexts the “ideological variable” that marked the Cold War.
From a more localized perspective, within the framework of the Nation-State, the contradictions raised by the “revenge” of religion questions, the relations between the majorities and the minorities present some challenges to the “secular hegemony.” The “fear of small numbers,” characterized by Appadurai (2006) as a process where “predatory identities” “claim to require the extinction of another collectivity for their own survival,” reveals the tensions caused by projects opposing some ideal of “national purity” that would be threatened by the religions and costumes of the “invasive minorities” (p. 51). Furthermore, in the words of Appadurai, “Minorities in a globalized word are a constant reminder of the incompleteness of national purity” (p. 84).

Besides all the conflicts and disruptions caused by the re-emergence of the religious in the public scene, it is also evident that societies, from North to South, from West to East, are confronted with the challenge of coexistence with the “other,” with the one who is different. Appiah (2006) claims that we, human beings in the globalized word, are immersed in “cosmopolitanism,” a situation where “we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by ties of kith and kind” (p. xv). Knowing the “other” becomes then at the same time an obligation (an ethical imperative) and an affirmation of culture as a means of connecting with people “not through identity but despite difference…” (p. 135, emphasis in original).

Our cosmopolitan situation is mainly the consequence of an extended and growing communication implying some form of direct or indirect dialogue across religions and cultures. Either through the face-to-face human interaction, in the institutional settings of governments, NGOs or corporations, or through different mediated means and platforms, the multiplicity of such encounters are growing and presenting new opportunities and challenges. What seems clear however is that nowadays it is impossible to conceive of any attempt of achieving coexistence or even an ideal of world peace without “peace between religions, without a dialogue between religions” (Küng, 1991, p. 9). However, as shown throughout the different chapters of this volume, the path towards more understanding and collaboration between different religions and cultural expressions is paved with barriers that need to be conceptually and practically addressed in order to open new ways for more fruitful dialogues.

Before introducing each one of the chapters included in this volume, it is necessary to explain to the reader the rationality that guided the selection of these texts. Some of the contributions are scholarly works that enter into a deep discussion of concepts and notions that nourish the theoretical and empirical research in such varied fields as philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, public relations, semiotics, and law. In order to complement this conceptual approach, this volume also includes relevant accounts of the practical and professional works of some of the authors, where they describe their relationship with religious and cultural diversity in the media world, the ethical and normative ruling, and the artistic curatorial role. That is why communication in this volume is understood both as an academic field and a set of practices that encompasses the interpersonal, mediated, and institutional forms of interaction and dialogue between actors.

The first section of this volume presents three chapters that, with different orientations and backgrounds, discuss the philosophical, sociological, and cultural dimensions of the encounters between religions, cultures, and between the religious and the secular, which should be considered another form of dialogue that is often overlooked in the interreligious debates. Dr. Henri Atlan makes a detailed account of the “Foundations of Interreligious Dialogue,” proposing to put aside the temptation of achieving any agreement around common beliefs or dogmas, and focusing more on the convergences in the philosophical teachings of different traditions. For Atlan, the ethical and legal issues arising from the role of science and technology today make it imperative to seize opportunities for dialogue. Faced with these
new issues, religions and philosophies must collaborate in their attempts to address them. Consequently, the author argues, their traditional role in the genealogy of ethics needs to be overhauled. This may be achieved, he proposes, through efforts to construct an empirically based universal ethics rather than a purely theoretical one that is limited to specific religious or philosophical doctrines.

Dr. Ian Linden’s chapter “Border Crossings: Secular versus Religious Arguments in the Public Domain” enters into the minefield of religious vs. secular tensions in Western societies, exploring some of the core misconceptions about the key concepts central to secularity and their interaction with the realm of religious discourse. In particular, Linden looks at the supposed hiatus between human rights discourse and religious views of justice with the objective to identify to the extent to which religious values and secular values are the same or are perceived to be different. He asks why Reason, Liberty, and Choice are assumed to be secular values in the public domain differentiating a secular worldview. Linden also discusses the role of assumptions made by journalists about these issues that would contribute to nourish a mystifying account of religion in the public domain.

In his chapter about “Transculturality and the Included Third,” Dr. Patrick Imbert enters into the domain of cultural diversity with a set of conceptual tools to criticize the dualistic views of multiculturalism and interculturalism that are based on the idea of an encounter between two different and cohesive cultures, what he calls the “monoculturalism” of the Nation-State. Imbert’s alternative to this dualism is the “included third,” an analytical notion to understand the semiotic codes of diversity. He analyzes a set of literary and mediated texts that represents manifestations of cultural memories that go beyond the official, and usually monochrome, histories. His analysis values the metaphor of chameleon, a metaphor of what Imbert describes as the very positive capacity to blend in different cultural contexts.

The second section of the volume is consecrated to the media representations of religions and the religious, where the authors discuss two different topics that illustrate the complexities and prejudices affecting the public’s perceptions of certain groups or even of religion as a legitimate domain in the popular culture. Dr. Mahmoud Eid’s chapter on “Religious Sphere in Canada: Public Manifestations and Media Representations” is a thorough study that reviews and compares research findings on Canadian media depictions of different faith groups over the past few decades. According to Eid, vast differences in media depictions exist. However, he concludes that dominant discourses and representations prevail for each faith group: Christians are the normal group; Muslims are in discord with Western societies; Jews require sympathy; Buddhists are peaceful; Hindus are friendly; and Sikhs are extremists. The author considers the mainstream media as a main driver of social cohesion in Canada because they construct ideologies and define communities. Eid suggests that considerable research needs to be conducted on Canadian mainstream media patterns of coverage and portrayals of interfaith activities within Canadian society.

In his chapter titled “Is Religion Compatible with Media Entertainment?” Dr. Guy Marchessault reflects on the place of the religious in popular culture, by asking some fundamental questions: Is it possible to reconcile the spectacular approach of the media with the inner nature of the spiritual? Can one imagine the presence of religions within an ambience of entertainment? Marchessault’s main argument is that there have always been tensions between religions and games, because religions feared theatre, play, music, arts, dance, cards, and media. Why is entertainment considered to be so dangerous? Would it be a better approach to discern true spiritual openings through play, and through media entertainment? According to the author, playing, entering a game, and certainly media entertainment, can open humans to their own “unlimited” potentials, giving significance to their relation with the world and with other humans, and so with the sacred. However, Marchessault sets in this chapter the framework within which this reconciliation between religion and entertainment can be achieved. First, this can be done only if one
respects the typical languages of the media, narratives and storytelling, which implies capacity of creativity in arts and rhetoric. Second, this requires respect for ethical and spiritual dimensions of believers.

The third section of the volume contains two chapters that look into the evolving and, in many ways, chaotic relations between religion and the cyberspace. The two texts are very different, but they show in their respective ways the highly disruptive effects of the Internet, and digital communication in general, on the more conventional notions of dialogue and encounter between religions. Dr. Pierre Levy’s chapter titled “An Exercise in Interreligious Conceptualization: Towards Online Creative Conversations” starts by identifying the current symbolic obstacles on the road to cultural and religious “inter-comprehension.” Levy looks into incompatibility and the cultural biases of classification systems of knowledge about religion and spirituality. To overcome these obstacles, he proposes using IEML (Information Economy MetaLanguage), a computable language specially suited to the online intercultural dialogue that Levy developed as the Canada Research Chair in Collective Intelligence at the University of Ottawa. The author presents some examples of the application of basic IEML categories to the religious domain, based on some universal classifications that contribute to overcome the culturally biased indexation systems.

Dr. Susan Palmer takes a more empirical direction in her chapter “Cult Wars on the Internet: Virtual Battles and the Challenges of Cyberspace,” where she analyzes the impact of the Worldwide Web on the trajectories of new and controversial religious movements. Her research indicates that the use of the Internet has, paradoxically, facilitated the expansion of minority religions, and, yet, it has also undermined their quest for social legitimacy. Palmer describes the ways in which different interest groups in the “Cult Wars” (i.e., “anticult” organization, Christian “countercult” groups, ex-members support networks, second-generation members, teen chat rooms, and official Websites of NRMs) use the Internet, from evangelism to “white-washing,” to whistle-blowing, to stigmatizing attacks. She discusses how Internet communications challenge the boundary maintenance in communal, utopian, or racist religions, with the formation of virtual ("dis-embodied") congregations. Palmer describes the use of the Internet in the “cult wars” by human rights and religious freedom activists, for the formation of new interest groups, forging and wielding of new cyber-weapons in these sectarian struggles (e.g., hacking or blocking Websites, promoting conspiracy theories), drawing on examples from the Falun Gong, Scientology, the International Raelian Movement, ISKCON, and others.

The fourth section of this volume is focused on the possibilities and obstacles to foster dialogue and cooperation between different religions through communication. Dr. Donn Tilson’s chapter titled “Public Relations and Religious Diversity: Toward the Common Good” presents a conceptual framework that embraces an interpretation of public relations as a social function, a covenantal model as a theoretical ground, an expanded worldview to include tolerance as an essential defining presupposition, and expanded communicative conceptual parameters that include religion in definitions of diversity and generic principles of excellent practice. Tilson reviews different faith communities in the United States, revealing that public relations professionals and other communicators model the conceptual framework in interfaith initiatives, and that the framework would serve as a helpful foundation for guiding communication professionals toward such behavior. The study also illustrates that socially responsible behavior often has a foundation of faith common across various faith traditions.

Dr. Douglas F. Cannon is inspired by the same question of Dr. Tilson (i.e. How communication can foster collaboration between faiths?), but he explores the roles of religious communicators in the context of tensions and disputes. In his chapter titled “All in the Family: How Should Religion Communicators Understand Relationships When Conflicts Arise?” Cannon suggests that following an inspired family concept of relationship, rather than the community-of-belief ontology, religion communicators might
find a different way to deal with conflicts. According to the author, religion communicators would not have to worry about simple disagreements disrupting connections built only on consensus and alienating people from the faith community. Cannon reviews the emerging focus on relationships and meaning co-creation in public relations scholarship and the roles communicators play in organizations. He also discusses the communitarian vs. liberal approaches to public relations, ending with an analysis of survey results showing how U.S. religion communicators describe public relations and do their work.

This section closes with Mrs. Richelle R. Wiseman’s reflections on “Media Narratives of the Interactions between Religions and Cultures in Canada,” from the point of the former Director of the Centre for Faith and the Media, a think tank founded in 2003 with a grant from Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism, to help improve religion reporting in Canada. Wiseman argues that a fixed and rigid “secularist” mindset among news outlets, magazine boardrooms, film companies, and other media will miss the richness of the creativity, diversity, imagination, and interactions between cultures and religions, which will continue to form the “street narratives” that the media’s meta-narrative overlooks. Her chapter documents instances of where this “meta-narrative” is seen to prevail and distort the accurate portrayal of religion and culture in Canada, where it has missed the interactions between religions and the contributions which culture and religion are making to each other.

The fifth section includes three chapters that in different ways and settings deal with what we have called the normative conversations on religion and culture in the public sphere. In his chapter “Media Policy, Co-Existence, and Freedom of Speech,” Mr. Ronald I. Cohen reviews the decisions of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) in relationship to complaints with particular relevance to religion, religious communities, and discourses. As the former National Chair of the CBSC, an independent, non-governmental organization created by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters to administer broadcast codes dealing with issues of ethics, stereotypes and portrayal, journalistic ethics, and violence on television, Cohen looks in detail into the Panel decisions. These decisions have served to define the parameters of permissible and excessive content on a broad array of radio and television programming, including news, public affairs, magazine format television shows, radio and television talk shows, children’s television, and other dramatic forms.

Professor Néstor Garrido’s chapter about “Blasphemy and Outrage in a Secular State: Venezuela’s Illegitimate Restrictions to Speech Based on a Republican Religion” closes this section with a study about how normative categories are transposed from the religious to the secular sphere in order to frame and limit freedom of speech. Garrido discusses the case of Venezuela, where different governments have used functional substitutes of religion in order to control freedom of thought and speech, and to promote a sense of consensus, by assuming a patriotic or republican religion as part of a political ideology. The author argues that Venezuelan republican religion is a paradigmatic phenomenon that manifests in different kind of regimes and countries such as North Korea, Cuba, Turkey, Ecuador, Russia, and Argentina, around some national heroes such as Kim Il Sung, Che Guevara, Atatürk, Manuelita Sáenz, Lenin, and Evita, untouchable, fundamental, and unquestionable figures, who, in some ways, have supplanted or overlapped with God in the public imagination. The author advances the thesis that this transposition of the religious norms to the secular judiciary is auspicious to create new forms of political control and indoctrination.

The sixth section combines an anthropological look into the hybrid manifestation of the religious in popular culture and the point of view of a curator about the convergence between art and religion as way to build historical memory and community. Dr. José Enrique Finol and Professor David Enrique Finol’s chapter, “Capillitas: Religion, Communication, and Syncretism in Small Roadside Communities
in Venezuela,“ studies the religious and funerary culture practiced alongside Venezuelan roads, where many car accidents cause a great number of deaths every year. After a car accident has caused the death of a person, family members build a small cenotaph known in Venezuela as capillita, where a variety of ritual practices are developed. According to family members, the capillita has to be built at the exact location where the victim “took his last breath.” The authors describe this small funerary culture as a vivid expression of rich and complex processes of religious syncretism that combines and integrates elements originally coming from Catholic, Jewish, and African-Venezuelan practices, along with popular agrarian myths and legends. Communication processes, sometimes among distant communities, located in different roads and highways, are based on family visits and religious meetings, where messages are exchanged face to face. But capillitas, argue Finol and Finol, are not only funerary monuments where family members and neighbors come to communicate with the deceased, visit and bring candles, flowers, water, liquor, and food. These are also signs of warning to passersby and, particularly, to drivers who are usually blamed for car accidents.

In “Cultural and Religious Dialogue: A Legacy of Religious Art,” Mrs. Judith E. Dietz makes a curatorial account of the exhibition “An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past,” first displayed at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, illustrating the positive effects of mutual co-operation between the cultural, religious, and civic communities in preserving religious and cultural heritage. Dietz describes the exhibition that featured a selected group of European sculptures from the Renaissance period donated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Halifax. The history and preservation of the three featured sculptures from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is revealed, from their installation in the Chapel Built in a Day in Halifax, to their removal and long-term conservation in Ottawa, and finally to their eventual return, public display, and ultimate community impact, resulting in additional donations and a new and rare discovery.

The volume ends with a Postscript where the editors reflect on the recent evolution of the public debates about interreligious and intercultural dialogues since they organized the international workshop on Cultural Dialogues, Religion, and Communication at the University of Ottawa in October 2009. That workshop inspired this book that includes the updated and expanded versions of some of the papers presented there, with some additional contributions that shed light into new issues that are emerging in the public debates about the place of religion in our societies.

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REFERENCES


