

The Ghosts in the Machine of Contemporary Scholarship on Media and Communication

Afterword

JOHN L. JACKSON, JR.
University of Pennsylvania, USA

This brief article examines some of the intersections between racial and religious commitments in many manifestations of populism. Using the recent Supreme Court decision on abortion in *Dobbs* to frame some of the stakes of this debate, I ask us to think about a few of the ways in which race and religion, far from being “primitive” forms of social connection transcended by the “modern” subject, continue to configure and constitute the fault lines of our political debates. The piece asks communication and media scholars to keep religion and race in mind as they analyze our contemporary political moment.

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This important collection asks readers to think deeply about three distinctive yet interconnected questions: What does the academic study of communication/media misunderstand about our contemporary moment when it marginalizes substantive discussions about religion? Given the fact that some media scholars recognize the value of engaging the rise of populisms across the globe, is there anything we miss about this phenomenon as a function of underplaying the constitutive role of religiosity in many of these political movements? And what difference does our decidedly “hybrid media environment” make in the circulatory dynamics and overall political import of religiously informed populisms?

These should not be questions that emanate from the scholarly or intellectual margins of our field. Rather, asking and attempting to answer these critical queries, as the contributors to this special issue have thoughtfully done, helps to make communication and media research even more relevant to ongoing analyses of the complex political processes, contested social policies, and evolving cultural practices that constitute our global public sphere.

As I draft this brief epilogue, Americans are still trying to make sense of the Supreme Court’s recent decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which effectively determined that the constitution does not guarantee a woman’s right to an abortion. This decision has opened the floodgates

John L. Jackson, Jr.: jackson5@asc.upenn.edu
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for new legislation at the state and federal levels, from both the political left and right, in an attempt to either capitalize on this blow to pro-choice advocates or as a means of doubling down on and further extending that Dobbsian mandate as far as it can go, making abortions increasingly impossible across the United States even when not outright banning them.

The court's ruling, many readers will recall, was presaged by a leaked early draft of the majority decision, and commentators in the media interpreted this arguably unprecedented breach in the confidentiality of the court as either a desperate attempt by an abortion-rights advocate to create a public outcry before the verdict was official (in hopes of getting some justices in the majority to change their votes) or by an anti-abortion activist trying to make sure that assenting justices did not get cold feet and change their minds (or just their votes) before the verdict became official. Of course, these various explanations for the leak and its ostensible implications were discussed and debated in newspapers and magazines, on political podcasts and cable news shows, and all over social media—often glossing the court's ruling as little more than the juridical extension and culmination of long-standing right-wing populist agitation.

It would be hard to deny the centrality of religious beliefs to discussions about the court's Dobbs decision. The newest justices are accused of allowing their religious faith to supersede their commitment to the freedom of American citizens and the autonomy of female bodies. All three Trump appointees were raised Catholic (as were six of the nine justices in total), and many critics argue that such disproportionate numbers go a long way in explaining the verdict. One of Obama's picks, Sonia Sotomayor, is among the Catholics on the court, and she cast an unequivocally strident dissenting opinion on Dobbs, which underscores the fact that we should be careful not to presuppose as absolute and definitive the impact of people's religious beliefs on other decisions they make as social actors.

Whenever I think of religion and its impact on contemporary social life, including in the context of rising populisms all around the world, I often invoke essentialized or easily essentializable identity categories, especially "race," as religion's usually close-quartered political bedfellows. Religion and race are often deemed atavistic remnants of an irrational and premodern moment ostensibly usurped by the rationalities of modern political subjectivity. This makes modern race's essentialisms and religion's often unfalsifiable metaphysics somewhat distinctive in their identitarian groundings. Few would argue that human beings will (or even should) eventually give up, say, any and all gender-based identities as a function of our march of progress and social evolution from traditional understandings of self and community (steeped in things like "tribe" or "sect") to more modern formulations of collectivity like citizenship. The argument is usually framed such that democratic possibility is predicated on shedding antiquated and superstitious investments in blood ties and religious affiliations. The modern political subject is only possible as a function of lowered commitments to race and religion—in ways that arguably differ from other forms of identificatory possibility (it should be pointed out, of course, that many scholars would argue that race is more accurately understood as a decidedly *modern* construction).

Such discussions are all the more fascinating when we think about recent and ongoing headlines, especially in the United States, about the extent to which Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the ubiquity of global conspiracy theories seem to animate our most cathected discussions about populist politics. Concerns about the dangers of CRT in K-12 schools (or even in colleges and universities) have translated into bans

and attempted bans on its teaching. Indeed, public intellectuals such as John McWhorter (2021) have gone so far as to deem some commitments to CRT a new kind of “woke” religion that includes key attributes of traditional religious attachments—as well as all the communal insularities, unfalsifiable claims, and antidemocratic proclivities.

Also, do not let sensationalist headlines about lizard people and Pizza-gate obscure the fact that there has never been a truly “global conspiracy theory” that has not been steeped in unabashed anti-Semitism and other forms of racist reasoning. Last year, I taught, for the first time, a graduate course called “The Racist in the Machine,” which tried to see what might be gained from examining racism as always already predicated on a kind of conspiracist mindset and conspiracy theories as spectacular instantiations of racialism taken to its logical conclusion. The course title plays with different mobilizations of the classic “ghost in the machine” rhetoric. One is the usage of that phrasing by journalist and best-selling author Arthur Koestler (1967). His book *The Ghost in the Machine* grounds the threat of nuclear annihilation in the primitive and reptilian parts of the brain that still haunt and hinder humanity’s attempts to live up to its full modern potential and highest ideals. Instead, we are susceptible to the grosser and less enlightened tendencies that social evolution has dampened a bit but not extinguished.

Koestler (1967) was playing with and popularizing an argument introduced decades earlier by philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949), who used the imagery of a “ghost in the machine” to characterize that fundamental Cartesian separation between mind and body. Ryle also provided inspiration to interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) and his well-known championing of “thick description” as the central and distinctive contribution of ethnographic research and writing to cross-cultural understanding, which is an argument about the limitation of simple observation without long-term and immersive ethnographic engagement of the kind that can distinguish between things that look the same to the naked eye but might mean quite different things to community insiders who interpret those ostensibly identical physical actions in distinctive and determinative cultural contexts. For the purposes of this brief essay, I would simply like to highlight the extent to which contemporary political analysis appears vexed by the rabid (and, some argue, growing) commitments to racial and religious fundamentalism that seem central to discussions about how various publics are being galvanized around hot-button political controversies. In fact, unpacking the racial and religious underpinnings to populist longings, underpinnings sometimes difficult to see at first glance (or simply difficult to see as *crucial*), might serve as a kind of critical thickening of our descriptions of many current political practices.

Of course, all of this is only more complicated when we take on this collection’s provocative claim about the impact of our “hybrid media environment” on the political circuits/connectivities that have an increasingly outsized role in our darkest nightmares about the catalyzing dynamics key to comprehending populism in the age of social media. For example, it is interesting to think that the dark Web, proprietary social media algorithms, and the echo-chambering of an increasingly balkanized and ideologically driven media landscape are all blamed for the radicalization of new would-be White nationalists, for the expansion of White nationalist networks domestically and internationally, and for the unabashed paranoia and alternative evidentiary grounding of antigovernment Q-Anoners and White evangelicals who read Donald Trump as a messianic figure sent by God to save humanity from diabolical forces hellbent on controlling the world. For scholars of communication, examining how debates about race and religion (and their often-inescapable

entanglements) impact contemporary politics is one more valuable way to reimagine what interventions the field might make with respect to ongoing debates about our political present and potential futures.

As someone trained in cultural anthropology, it is hard not to fall back on the disciplinary truism: those things that matter most to human beings are all the stuff of culture. They are the beliefs and practices we hold dear that must be learned, can be shared, and retain some capacity for being passed on to generations that come behind us. Of course, one of the most powerful fictions of race is that it is, in fact, not merely cultural at all. Instead, typical racist logics consider it an inescapably biological/natural way of categorizing and hierarchizing human physical variation. Similarly, though anthropologists are wont to study religions as deeply held cultural convictions, we recognize that such a stance would be deemed disrespectful and profane to many religious practitioners—and not just those who consider themselves Christians or Muslims. There is no objective and Archimedean perch beyond and outside of an omnipotent God's, and any invocation of such a vantage point is already sacrilege. If race is deemed the *nature* to culture's provincialisms and particularities, religion is a claim of supernatural superiority over cultural and even natural realities of any kind. Indeed, all White supremacist logics seem to demonstrate commitment to supernatural prerequisites and anchors for all ostensible claims about natural and cultural differences between racial groups. The Ku Klux Klan's iconic flag on fire is just one poignant distillation of the ultimate religious backstopping of our racist longings—especially any of those that have a chance of gaining traction with the masses.

This collection should serve as a reminder of just how critical issues of religion are to any discussions about the underlying investments that increasingly appear central to the political machinations of contemporary demagoguery and the populisms they often seek to create or exploit by short-circuiting any potential wisdom endemic to crowds (Surowiecki, 2005) with the more easily manipulable dynamics of group-think and a kind of mob mentality that 19th-century poet and journalist Charles Mackay (1980) described as the "extraordinary popular delusions" that drive groups crazy. Of course, it is always easiest to see other people's beliefs as delusions, which means that for communication scholars, the goal is not simply to disabuse populist adherents of their false consciousness. Instead, it might be better described as attempting to understand the productive and decidedly constitutive sway that religion continues to have on a body politic increasingly dismissed as out of its collective mind.

Communication scholars are most likely to be helpful in these discussions when they avoid engaging in such too-easy dismissals—or in the equally problematic response of pretending the relevance of such ongoing religious commitments away with enlightened and hubristic indifference. Ironically, the latter move might actually represent the antithesis of what some would call clear-eyed, modernist rationality, only serving to impoverish our fullest engagement with some of the empirical questions about political life that matter most to many of us.

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