

Religion and Superdiversity: An Introduction

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Introduction

About 10 years ago, Steven Vertovec (2007) coined the notion of superdiversity in order to describe a scenario in which a rapidly growing number of migrants remained outside the existing social, economic and cultural categories that are routinely used to describe migration flows, and to pinpoint the increasing complexity of variables describing the social status and everyday lives of migrants in Britain. Since then, the term has been taken up across the social sciences and has more generally been used to describe social dynamics in societies characterized by high levels of immigration and population mobility (Meissner and Vertovec 2015; Meissner 2015). While religion was initially not very central to debates around migration-driven diversity, this has changed dramatically over recent years (Becci, Burchardt and Giorda 2016). In this special issue, we explore the multiplication and dynamics of religious differences and the extent to which the notion of “religious superdiversity” suggests a fruitful avenue to guide research and theorization.

Before the term superdiversity appeared, the concept of religious diversity was employed in a number of ways. We suggest that there are three main sociological discourses in which it served different purposes. First, in earlier secularization theory, religious diversity was chiefly understood against the backdrop of post-Reformation Christian diversity and seen as a factor that either favored or hindered religious belief and participation. Peter L. Berger (1967) famously suggested that the visible existence of different religions

undermined in the eyes of the believer the credibility of all of them. Theorists of religious economies (Stark and Finke 2000), on the contrary, saw religious diversity in open market situations as a condition of religious vitality. Second, and subsequently, theories and accounts of new religious movements (Barker 1999) were primarily interested in the cause and consequences of religious heterodoxy, which they linked to changes in the very institutional form of religion and its far-reaching deinstitutionalization (Luckmann 1967). Third, more contemporary approaches are primarily animated by the increasing presence of migrant religions and centrally interested in how they are accommodated in the institutional frameworks of the nation-state and in how their presence challenges dominant regimes of citizenship and secularism.

We suggest that today, there is a need to better understand how, in contemporary societies, religious diversity is afforded visibility, how it is spatially arranged and emplaced, and how religious diversity becomes a category whereby ordinary people render their social worlds legible (Stringer 2013, Wessendorf 2014). The term superdiversity opens up new perspectives in this regard. We propose that the relationships between religion and superdiversity needs to be elaborated and suggest that there are two majorly distinct ways to do so. First, there are important questions about “religion in the context of superdiversity,” which address the relationships between religion and other status categories in contexts of migration-driven diversification such as race, ethnicity, legal status, age, and

gender. And second, we emphasize the emergence, parallel development and mutual constitution of different kinds of religious differences, in other words: the interactions of different religious diversities which gives rise to what we call religious superdiversity. However, as we will also show, both perspectives cannot be isolated from one another. Research into diversity in contemporary immigration societies must take up the challenge not only to conceptualize religion as a marker of difference but also to recognize the internal diversity of practices, identities and epistemologies that are grouped under the label of religion. In what follows, we analyze each of these issues in some detail, scrutinize sociological and anthropological approaches to them and highlight the ways in which the articles in this special issue further our understanding of them.

Religion in the Context of Superdiversity

As mentioned above, religion did not play a major role in earlier scholarly debates on migration. This situation has changed drastically and social scientists now view religion as central to understanding immigrants' choices, migration trajectories and social integration (Levitt 2007, Kivisto 2015, Connor 2014, Banchoff 2007, Burchardt 2016). Similarly, we note that religion used to play a minor or simplified role within scholarly and normative debates on societal paradigms that emerged from political theories around migration. Dominant during the 1980s and 1990s, the paradigm of multiculturalism was geared towards emphasizing the recognition of multiple cultural heritages in terms of country of origin, and in the North American context, the rights of First Nations (Kymlicka 1995). Religion was reduced to an aspect of ethnic culture and belonging. Subsequently, the paradigm of diversity and especially that of superdiversity were meant to ameliorate the shortcomings of multiculturalism in accounting for the internal differentiation of migrants' characteristics (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010; Cattle 2005, 2012). Importantly, these paradigms also seemed to

open new conceptual spaces for considering the location of religion.

While such work is underway (Becci, Burchardt and Giorda 2016; Stringer 2013), important shifts on the ground point to the real urgency of taking religion more seriously in theory development: First, many scholars pointed to the more central place of religion in debates over recognition. Grillo (2010) and Eade (2011) have observed how the object of recognition in Britain has shifted from "race to faith" while D'Amato (2015) has explored the political construction in Switzerland of a "homo islamicus" within a "total discourse" homogenizing Muslim identity (Behloul 2009). Second, we note the increasing importance of the law and court-based decision-making in shaping immigrant integration. This process as well has led to a rise in salience of religion in framing claims of recognition (Koenig 2010). This is particularly important as there has been simultaneously and across Europe a "Multiculturalism Backlash" (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010) and retreat from it (Joppke 2004). While some saw this retreat as rather rhetorical (Poppelaars and Scholten 2008) others insisted that it did have a real political and legal substrate (Joppke 2012). Burchardt and Michalowski (2015) showed in a comparative analysis of 10 European countries that while the cultural rights of immigrants have been curtailed in the context of the mentioned multiculturalism backlash, their religious rights have actually expanded during the same period in most countries (with the exception of Switzerland). Religion thus emerged as a new arena for contestations over cultural boundaries, as a fundamental marker of difference and identity and as an increasingly important category of recognition. It is thus clear that the arenas of religious claims-making is not even playing field but instead hierarchically organized and shot through with power dynamics.

In order to fully appreciate religion in the context of superdiversity, it is equally important to explore how religion may exaggerate, affirm or unsettle established or dominant notions of social and cultural difference both in institu-

tional contexts and everyday life. In many European countries, migrants' religious identity as Christians may help them to lower their profile in public debates on immigrant integration as a social problem, or to foreground commonalities with host societies. If host societies are highly secularized, such as the Netherlands or Belgium, such commonalities may also easily fade, or actually turn into cultural differences (Carol, Helbling and Michalowski 20105). Conversely, in many European public discourses, Muslims are routinely marked as ethnically and religiously different, whereby religious stereotyping exaggerates other grounds of xenophobic rejection. At the same time, we see variable shifts in the demographic composition and public images of religious communities with the rise in Europe of Western Buddhism and African Christianities.

Gertrud Hüwelmeier's contribution to this special issue is based on the ethnography of Germans of Vietnamese origin in bazaars and marketplaces that are considered ethnic and is a clear illustration of "religion in the context of superdiversity." Her ethnography allows us to look at how the religious identities and practices of her informants are linked to, and refracted by, their political orientations within this ethnic category through a focus on interactions, discourse, sounds and aesthetics. These different religious belongings and practices, in this case evangelical and buddhist, exist and at moments clash within this category. However, in Berlin, where her research is mainly located, secularity is the dominant cultural frame. Hüwelmeier addresses the city as a scalar formation and the bazaar as the precise sub-unit in which superdiversity becomes tangible. In the bazaar, religion is not hidden from secular activities but openly displayed and circulates in the same way as money. Religion acquires meaning in bazaar-based interactions as a form of communication and identity differentiation, of social contestation and political affiliation, and of the expression of aspirations to wealth and health.

In her contribution to this special issue, Deirdre Meintel argues that North America provides

a very different context in which the situation that the term superdiversity tries to capture is not as new as it appears to be in Europe. Her article takes a close look at Canada, where local communities have dealt with different religions and ethnicities for a long time. Though religion is often associated with migration, this research highlights that the proportion of non-religious people is often higher among migrants than among non-migrants. Significantly, she insists on the fact that religion is, in this context of superdiversity, very rarely a source of conflict and much more commonly a factor that fosters solidarity and conviviality, but research on this aspect is rare. Boundaries that seemed impossible to overcome in social settings in migrants' countries of origin are being much more easily bridged in Canada. Also Fabretti and Vieri's article in this special issue shows how the relationships between different religious and secular actors can be both conflictive and cooperative.

An often overlooked aspect of religion in contexts of superdiversity is that not only do religious groups multiply as they are formed by different ethnic communities or pray in different languages, but that individuals also draw on multiple religions in crafting their religious lives. In her article, Liza Steele offers a compelling analysis of this phenomenon of "multi-religiosity" and is based on both qualitative and quantitative data. She discusses the limits inherent in the prototypical scientific approach to people's relation to religion which is framed as the result of the overlapping of belonging, practicing and emotional commitment. However, such an overlapping is not the norm. More common are persons who negotiate their link to different religions throughout their life course according to their experiences, relations, situations and mobility.

The Emergence of Multiple Religious Diversities: Religious Superdiversity

While there is, as we have argued above, a need to pay close attention to how religious practices and identities are shaped through their entwinement with categories such as gender and eth-

nicity in the context of superdiversity, we also suggest that we see new ways in which different registers of religious diversity evolve alongside and in relation to one another. Most sociologists use the term religious diversity to describe the migration-driven presence of “world religions” (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc.) on different social scales (neighborhoods, cities, nations, the globe).

In an important contribution, sociologist James Beckford (2000) has demonstrated how in scholarly literature, religious diversity refers to the number of religious traditions present in a given setting without regard to their or symbolic or numerical strength, to the number of religious communities with considerable membership but also to the diversity that is internal to large historical religions such as Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. The notion is, moreover, sometimes used to name multiple personal or collective compositions of religious identity, to describe syncretic or hybrid religious processes or even sometimes to refer to the individual practice of *bricolage*. Beyond the question of what the unit of analysis is when the term is used, Beckford has also highlighted the slippage in texts on diversity from a descriptive to a normative level. As a matter of fact, a number of studies on diversity tend to induce from the observation of religious diversity that this diversity is embraced normatively. For Beckford, clearly sociologists should keep “fact and value separate” (1991: 56) and empirically study the existence of diverse religious groups and practices and the public response to it. The reflection on the ideal or the politically most desirable way to respond is a domain that belongs rather to the political philosophy concerned with the notion of pluralism.

Adding to Beckford’s elaboration, we define religious superdiversity as a more encompassing and complex cultural formation involving variables and dynamics such as religious innovation (e.g. scientology or transcendental meditation) that are not directly related to migration and much more connected actually to normative and symbolic dimensions. This matters on the one

hand because the extent to which new spiritual movements and religious migrant groups are or not subjected to national or urban regulations of their practices, ritual and places of worship varies. On the other hand, such regulations also directly influence the labels and categories used to consider and apprehend religious diversity itself. In this issue, Liza Steele discusses that despite the many documented complexities influencing contemporary everyday religion, most quantitative and qualitative research instruments only allow respondents to choose one religious affiliation. If the respondent says that s/he is “not religious,” questionnaire filters often prevent religious participation or feelings from being measured at all.

Moreover, in countries where traditionally Christian churches have been established, religious newcomers’ demand for recognition will be framed by that establishment. In this issue, Vieri and Fabbretti nicely discuss such a case through their analysis of religious superdiversity in Rome. Such processes sometimes create expectations towards heterodox groups (in terms of ethnicity, languages, administrative status, etc.) to conflate in one singular category, as is the case with Islam. The difficulty of the concerned actors to reunite can then even become the evidence of their being unreliable and inconsistent. Paradoxically, and as in a sort of double bind, if the unity comes together, it may then become a factor of fear and suspicion.

Another enlightening example is the notion of the “spiritual.” In recent years an increasing number of persons describe themselves as more spiritual than religious, or spiritual but not religious (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Houtman 2012). The practices they thereby usually mean are perfectly part of what sociologists would qualify as religious although they might be extra-institutional: tarot, yoga, meditation, neo-shamanism, neo-paganism, etc. The notion of the spiritual seems to have emerged as a practical alternative to religious and secular, as such it often operates as a mediator and blurs clear-cut established boundaries (Huss 2014). Such a process can be illustrated by the recent success, in

the cultural domain, of *exoticized* (Altglas 2015) ideas of authentic pre-Christian religions such as Neo-paganism, Tibetan Buddhism or Mayanism as Manéli Farahmand and Sybille Rouiller show in their contribution to this special issue.

Encompassing formations of religious superdiversity have been brought about by several key sources, which we now briefly analyze. First, as mentioned above, transnational migration not only helped to diversify religious landscapes but also diversifies existing religious traditions, for example Western Christianity that is transformed through the practices of African and Asian Christians. Migration has caused internal differentiation of religious traditions but such traditions have also been reshaped and reinvented simply through the reception and circulation of ideas, practices and discourses. Second, the postcolonial interrogations and deconstructions of the notion of religion have supported claims to recognize groups formerly considered to only have “culture” or “indigenous tradition” but not “religion” (see e.g. the debates on indigenous spiritualities). Looking at the factor of religion as a hologram, one can indeed realize that it inflects all other status variables. In other words, sociologists and anthropologists of religion have raised awareness about the fact that there is indeed a situation of religious superdiversity in current societies and that religion itself contains diversity in terms of gender, age, network relations and so on. And third, religious and philosophical innovation has become visible in numerous and culturally eclectic movements committed to new spiritualities. Each of these groups or movements is shaped by particular spatial practices and topographies, which are linked to national and urban histories, including their ethnic and gender hierarchies and power relations that shape the meanings of space and place. Farahmand and Rouiller compare two such movements that are characterized by the suffix “neo”, one within neo-shamanism in France, the other one revalorizing the Mayan culture and religion in a New Age fashion in Mexico. In both movements, participants are very mobile and this mobility itself is

the engine for new hybridizations and innovation. Significantly, both movements draw together ethnic markers and spirituality, and in fact construe spirituality as foundational to ethnicity. Here, superdiversity shapes religious expressions through the questioning of the external boundaries of the notion of religion. Skillfully woven into one another, Manéli Farahmand and Sybille Rouiller’s ethnographies focus on the similarity of ritual objects despite all the difference and on some structural parallels in the life-courses of the protagonists of the movements.

Fabretti and Vieri’s research conducted in the Italian capital city of Rome offers unique insights into the city as a particularly spatial and scalar formation of specific religious superdiversity. Their study ties this formation to cultural and political-institutional factors at work. The authors argue that because of the image of Rome as the ‘religious city’ par excellence, all kinds of diversity tend to be expressed through the register of religion. Anchored in national imaginaries, reflected in urban aesthetics and materialities, and circulating through global media networks, the image of Rome as a religious city draws notions of difference into religious idioms despite the fact that Italy’s legacy of monolithic Catholicism seems to suggest otherwise. Fabretti and Vieri astutely observe how this image has produced and enhanced religious diversity, by encouraging diverse religious groups to make and mark their places in the urban space in a monumental way. Similar to the other studies presented in this issue, they also highlight that religious superdiversity simultaneously develops at global and local scales.

One of the challenges arising from this conceptualization of religious superdiversity is certainly its operationalization in empirical research. In this issue Liza Steele discusses how she has found and tried to make sense of multiple ties to religion when she encountered people with multiple religious commitments in one of her research projects. For instance, how can one measure the practice of Buddhism among Christians and Jews, regular church attendance among those who say

they are not religious, and the children of mixed religious couples who might be raised with some level of identification with the spiritual traditions of both parents? In a highly original approach, she considers how to quantitatively capture such situations through an analysis of data from the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life in the United States in 2009.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue make it clear that religious diversity is not a given but that it is itself constructed through a variety of patterns of human mobility throughout people's life course and across the globe as well as through changes in political orientation, class, and gender. These locally grounded and historically crystallizing layers of religious expression and especially their interconnectedness articulate what we call formations of religious superdiversity.

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