

Editorial Note

How Religion Becomes Public: Identity, Authority, Governance, and Cultural Memory

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Abstract: This editorial asks a central question for contemporary Religious Studies: How does religion become public? Moving beyond approaches that locate religion primarily in belief, doctrine, or formal institutions, it examines how religious meanings acquire visibility, authority, political consequence, and durability in public life. Using a comparative interpretive reading of the seven research articles in this issue, this editorial identifies four interconnected processes. First, religion becomes visible through collective performance, identity-making, institutional habituation, and social recognition. Second, it becomes authoritative through institutional formation, expertise, legal interpretation, ritual legitimation, and boundary-making. Third, religion becomes politically consequential when religious identities, claims, and authorities are connected to institutions and networks that organize governance, citizenship, representation, resources, security, and power. Fourth, religion becomes publicly durable through cultural memory, ritual repetition, sacred sound, architecture, materiality, and other forms of mediation. Read together, these processes show that religion does not enter public life as an autonomous or self-contained force. Its public effects emerge through historically situated configurations of actors, institutions, practices, networks, media, materials, and memories. The editorial, therefore, proposes understanding religion as a relational and mediated public force and cautions against reducing it to belief, institution, identity, or a singular cause of political and social outcomes. It concludes by advancing a research agenda attentive to comparative and multi-sited analysis, internal diversity, minority voices, migration, political economy, digital mediation, platforms, algorithms, networked publics, and artificial intelligence as emerging infrastructures through which religion becomes visible, authoritative, contested, politically consequential, and publicly durable.

Keywords: cultural memory; governance; public religion; religious authority; religious identity.

Abstrak: Catatan editorial ini mengajukan pertanyaan utama bagi Studi Agama kontemporer: bagaimana agama menjadi publik? Dengan melampaui pendekatan yang menempatkan agama terutama pada keyakinan, doktrin, atau institusi formal, editorial ini mengkaji bagaimana makna keagamaan memperoleh visibilitas, otoritas, konsekuensi politik, dan keberlanjutan dalam kehidupan publik. Melalui pembacaan interpretatif-komparatif terhadap tujuh artikel penelitian dalam edisi ini, editorial ini mengidentifikasi empat proses yang saling berkaitan. Pertama, agama terlihat melalui performa kolektif, pembentukan identitas, habituasi institusional, dan pengakuan sosial. Kedua, agama memperoleh otoritas melalui pembentukan institusional, keahlian, interpretasi hukum, legitimasi ritual, dan pembentukan batas-batas normatif. Ketiga, agama menjadi konsekuensial secara politik ketika identitas, klaim, dan otoritas keagamaan terhubung dengan institusi dan jaringan yang mengatur tata kelola, kewargaan, representasi, sumber daya, keamanan, dan kekuasaan. Keempat, agama memperoleh keberlanjutan publik melalui memori kultural, pengulangan ritual, suara sakral, arsitektur, materialitas, serta berbagai bentuk mediasi lainnya. Dibaca secara keseluruhan, proses-proses tersebut menunjukkan bahwa agama tidak memasuki kehidupan publik sebagai kekuatan yang otonom atau berdiri sendiri. Dampak publiknya muncul melalui konfigurasi aktor, institusi, praktik, jaringan, media, material, dan memori yang terbentuk secara historis. Editorial ini, karena itu, mengusulkan pemahaman agama sebagai kekuatan publik yang relasional dan termediasi serta menghindari reduksi agama menjadi keyakinan, institusi, identitas, atau penyebab tunggal berbagai

fenomena sosial-politik. Sebagai agenda ke depan, Studi Agama perlu memberi perhatian lebih besar pada analisis komparatif dan multisitus, keragaman internal, suara minoritas, migrasi, ekonomi politik, mediasi digital, platform, algoritma, publik berjejaring, serta kecerdasan buatan sebagai infrastruktur baru yang membentuk bagaimana agama terlihat, berotoritas, diperdebatkan, konsekuensial secara politik, dan bertahan dalam kehidupan publik.

Kata Kunci: memori kultural; tata kelola; agama publik; otoritas keagamaan; identitas keagamaan.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Religious Studies is increasingly moving beyond approaches that view religion primarily in terms of beliefs, doctrines, and formal religious institutions. Although these dimensions remain important, scholars have broadened the scope of their analysis to view religion as practiced, embodied, mediated, institutionalized, materially expressed, and closely intertwined with power relations and public life. The debate over public religion provides a crucial starting point for understanding this shift. In his book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, José Casanova (1994) challenges influential versions of secularization theory that assume modernization will gradually confine religion to the private sphere. His concept of the “deprivatization of religion” highlights religious traditions and institutions that are re-entering public controversy, challenging political and social orders, and making moral claims beyond the private lives of their adherents. Nearly two decades later, Casanova (2012) revisited this thesis and argued that the framework of public religion needs to be expanded beyond its original Western Christian context, acknowledging the increasingly visible and contested presence of religion in the public sphere across various societies. This broader intellectual development has gradually shifted the question from whether religion persists or reemerges in public life toward a more relational and process-oriented inquiry: how does religion become public, through what social mechanisms, and under what institutional, cultural, material, and political conditions? This shift aligns with developments in the study of “lived religion,” which directs attention from religion as an institutionally defined set of beliefs toward religion as it is actually practiced and experienced in everyday life (McGuire, 2008), as well as with recent approaches that situate religious practices within broader configurations related to embodiment, materiality, cultural context, and regulation (Ammerman, 2022). Rather than treating religion as a self-contained domain that merely enters an already established public sphere, contemporary Religious Studies is therefore increasingly asking how specific configurations of practices, institutions, mediation, materiality, and power render religion socially visible and publicly consequential.

The development of lived religion has been particularly important to this analytical expansion because it shifts scholarly attention from religion as primarily prescribed by institutions to religion as enacted in concrete social worlds. Ammerman (2015) characterizes lived-religion research as an approach that attends to the everyday practices of ordinary people rather than limiting the study of religion to official texts, organizations, and religious experts. Its analytical domain consequently includes rituals, stories, spiritual experiences, festivals, shrines, healing practices, embodied conduct, material objects, and communal activities through which religious meanings are experienced and reproduced in everyday life. This perspective does not imply that formal institutions, traditions, or doctrines have become irrelevant. Indeed, Ammerman’s (2016) later assessment of the field cautions against defining lived religion simply by its distance from institutional religion and calls for greater attention to how everyday practices intersect with embodiment, discourse, materiality, traditions, institutions, gender, and relations of power. Religion, from this perspective, is neither exclusively institutional nor purely individual; it emerges through relations among actors, practices, institutions, objects, spaces, narratives, and wider structures of authority. This expanded understanding is particularly relevant to the contributions in this issue. Across different geographical and sociopolitical contexts, the articles demonstrate that religion becomes public through multiple and intersecting social processes: collective performance creates ethnic visibility; institutional habituation translates normative values into civic-moral orientations; political mobilization connects religious identities with networks

of power and violence; legal regulation establishes and contests the boundaries of legitimate religious expression; ritual authorization links contemporary practice with inherited narratives; cultural memory makes selected representations of the past socially consequential; and material mediation embeds religious meanings in architecture, space, sound, and other perceptible forms. These processes suggest that the public presence of religion is not a singular movement from the private to the public sphere, but an ongoing process through which religion is enacted, authorized, represented, regulated, remembered, and materialized in social life.

The geographical and thematic range of the contributions in this issue provides a particularly productive setting for examining these processes comparatively. The studies span Myanmar, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Israel, engaging with phenomena as diverse as an ethnic-religious festival, education in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), religious and political radicalism, democratic governance and national identity, the legal regulation of blasphemy and religious expression, ritual historiography, and religious architecture. These cases differ considerably in historical formation, religious composition, political structure, and institutional context. However, their diversity should not be understood as producing a fragmented collection of unrelated studies. On the contrary, placing them in conversation reveals distinct pathways through which religion acquires public presence and social consequence. In Myanmar, collective ritual and cultural performance illuminate how religious-cultural gatherings may contribute to ethnic visibility and organizational solidarity; in Indonesia, educational institutions, criminal law, ritual narratives, and religious heritage reveal different modes through which religion is cultivated, regulated, remembered, and materially represented; in Nigeria, the intersection of religious radicalism with political networks and economies of violence demonstrates how religion becomes entangled with insecurity and structures of power; while in Israel, relations among religion, national identity, coalition politics, and democratic institutions foreground the institutional negotiation of religious difference and citizenship. The comparative significance of these cases, therefore, lies not in assuming that religion performs the same function across societies but precisely in showing that religion becomes public through contextually specific configurations of actors, institutions, practices, narratives, legal regimes, political structures, and material forms. Their juxtaposition enables this issue to approach public religion not as a uniform social condition, but as a plurality of processes through which religious meanings become visible, authoritative, contested, and consequential in different social worlds.

Against this background, this editorial argues that religion becomes public through four interconnected processes. The first is the production of collective visibility and identity, through which religious practices, gatherings, and institutional experiences make communities publicly recognizable while simultaneously shaping how collective identities are understood from within. The second is the institutionalization and authorization of religious values, whereby educational institutions, religious authorities, legal actors, and inherited traditions translate normative claims into socially recognized forms of authority. The third concerns the negotiation of religion through governance, law, citizenship, and violence, where religious identities and claims become entangled with political institutions, state regulation, competing rights, networks of power, and structures of insecurity. The fourth is the transmission and public durability of religion through ritual, cultural memory, and material forms, through which narratives of the past, sacred sound, architecture, embodied performance, and religious heritage make religion perceptible and meaningful across generations. These four processes are analytically distinguishable but empirically intertwined: visibility can generate authority, institutions can regulate identity, political arrangements can reshape religious expression, and ritual or material forms can sustain the authority of particular religious representations. Religion becomes public, therefore, not through a single movement from private belief to public action, but through overlapping processes of representation, authorization, regulation, negotiation, and mediation.

The following sections develop these processes through four interconnected analytical themes emerging from the contributions to this volume. The first examines religion, identity, and public visibility, asking how collective identities are performed, cultivated, and made socially recognizable through festivals and institutional life. The second turns to religious authority, institutions, and

boundary-making, focusing on how the authority to define legitimate religion is produced across educational settings, legal regimes, and ritual traditions. The third addresses religion, governance, citizenship, and violence, exploring the conditions under which religious identities become implicated in democratic institutions, state regulation, political mobilization, and economies of insecurity. The final section considers ritual, cultural memory, and material religion, examining how religious worlds are transmitted and made publicly durable through narratives, sounds, performances, spaces, and architectural forms. Rather than treating these themes as separate domains, the discussion reads them relationally in order to identify a broader problem at the center of contemporary Religious Studies: how religious meanings acquire visibility, authority, political consequence, and durability as they move through different social worlds.

2. Religion, Identity, and Public Visibility

Religious and collective identities are often treated as if they were already constituted social attributes: individuals are classified as belonging to a religion, ethnicity, or national community, and analysis then proceeds by asking how those identities influence attitudes or action. Such an approach, however, risks taking the group's existence and coherence for granted. Brubaker's (2002) critique of groupism is particularly useful here. Rather than treating ethnic, national, religious, or other collectivities as internally homogeneous and externally bounded entities that automatically possess common interests and collective agency, he directs attention to the categories, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects, and contingent events through which what he calls groupness emerges and becomes socially consequential. From this perspective, religious and collective identities should not be understood simply as attributes that individuals or communities possess; they are also produced and stabilized through practices of gathering, representation, institutionalization, repetition, and social recognition. The relevant question for Religious Studies, therefore, shifts from asking how a pre-existing religious or ethnic identity shapes social behavior to asking how religious and collective identities are produced, performed, and made publicly recognizable in the first place. This shift is especially important when examining minority communities whose collective presence may intensify at particular moments rather than remain equally visible throughout everyday social life. The Danu Son See Yar Day festival in Myanmar provides a particularly revealing case of this process, showing how a recurring religious-cultural gathering can become a setting in which dispersed forms of belonging are brought together, publicly performed, and gradually transformed into more visible forms of collective identity.

Javanasami's (2026) study of the Danu Son See Yar Day (DSSYD) demonstrates how such groupness can be produced through a recurring religious-cultural event under conditions in which collective identity has historically had limited public visibility. The study shows that Danu identity has been constrained by relatively weak symbolic and linguistic differentiation, geographical dispersion, limited interregional connectivity, modest cultural promotion, and comparatively low public-political visibility (Javanasami, 2026). DSSYD changes this condition not simply by displaying Danu culture but by creating a recurring social arena in which dispersed communities assemble, participate in religious practices, perform cultural forms, renew interpersonal and interregional ties, and encounter themselves as members of a wider collectivity. The mechanism identified in the study can therefore be understood as a movement from religious-cultural gathering to repeated interaction, from interaction to collective performance and social connection, and from these practices to collective representation and greater ethnic visibility (Javanasami, 2026). This interpretation resonates with Stoeltje's (1992) understanding of festivals as public, participatory, and collective phenomena rooted in group life, through which communities express identity and articulate cultural heritage. The significance of DSSYD, therefore, lies not merely in its celebration of an existing Danu identity but in its capacity to provide a recurring social arena through which that identity becomes visible, experiential, and collectively recognizable. Seen in this way, the festival does more than communicate who the Danu are to an external audience; it also creates repeated occasions through which geographically dispersed members can experience

themselves as belonging to a larger social collectivity, while strengthening the relational foundations for broader forms of coordination and representation (Javanasami, 2026).

This reading allows the DSSYD festival to be conceptualized as an infrastructure for identity-making rather than merely a celebration of identity. Collective identity need not be fully formed before entering public representation; repeated acts of representation can themselves help generate the sense of commonality they appear to express. In the Danu case, cultural performances bring dispersed participants into a shared arena, where mutual recognition strengthens social connections. These connections, in turn, reinforce a sense of groupness, while stronger groupness can provide a basis for broader forms of collective coordination. In this sense, identity formation develops through an interconnected process in which performance generates recognition, recognition deepens social connection, social connection strengthens groupness, and groupness facilitates coordination. Javanasami's (2026) findings support this interpretation by showing that DSSYD contributes to cultural visibility and intersects with broader organizational developments associated with the Danu National Conference and the Danu National Affairs Organization. Cultural visibility may thus develop into organizational capacity when recurring encounters create networks, shared recognition, and opportunities for collective coordination. Brubaker's (2002) distinction between ethnic categories and varying degrees of groupness is particularly productive in this context. The central analytical question is less whether a Danu ethnic category exists than when, where, and through which social processes that category acquires sufficient relational density to support collective recognition and action. Rather than taking bounded groups as the starting point of analysis, Brubaker directs attention to organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects, and contingent events through which groupness becomes salient (Brubaker, 2002).

Research on religious festivals further demonstrates that collective identity and religious meaning are produced through the interplay of public performance, embodied participation, spatial practice, and symbolic representation. Hüsken's (2023) study of the Āti Atti Varatar Vaipavam festival in Kanchipuram emphasizes that festivals operate as public performances through which cultural, social, and religious identities are represented and negotiated, suggesting that festival participation actively shapes how communities present themselves and imagine their collective belonging. The spatial dimension is equally significant. Examining annual pilgrimages at Croagh Patrick and Our Lady's Island in Ireland, Scriven and O'Mahony (2020) show that sacred places are continually constituted through corporeal practices, movement, and collective performance, as participants inscribe, reinforce, and sometimes contest religious meanings within particular landscapes. Pati's (2025) analysis of the Uthra Śivēli festival in Kerala further develops this insight by demonstrating how ritual processions, performances, spatial movement, and embodied interactions among devotees, deities, and places help transform an urban environment into a religious landscape. Taken together, these studies suggest that festivals cannot be understood simply as occasions on which already established religious or cultural identities are displayed. They are social and spatial environments in which collective meanings are enacted, negotiated, experienced, and renewed through the coordinated presence of bodies, symbols, performances, and places. Read in relation to the Danu case, this perspective reinforces the argument that recurring festival participation can contribute to the formation of collective recognition itself: gathering in a shared space, performing recognizable cultural and religious forms, and experiencing these practices together provide social conditions through which dispersed participants may increasingly perceive themselves as belonging to a common community. Public visibility, in this sense, is produced through repeated embodied and spatial practices rather than functioning merely as the external representation of a pre-existing identity.

If the Danu case illustrates identity-making through public performance, the study of Sukorejo *Pesantren* reveals a different mechanism: institutional habituation. Hosaini et al. (2026) show that religious moderation and national commitment acquire meaning through a layered institutional environment in which philosophical commitments, curriculum, leadership, dialogical pedagogy, *bahtsul masail* (a collective forum for deliberating Islamic legal and social questions), exemplary conduct, residential routines, civic activities, and social service are repeatedly encountered in everyday

pesantren life. The significance of this finding lies in the movement from normative formulation to lived orientation. Religious moderation and national commitment do not remain merely as state terminology, institutional slogans, or curricular content; they become meaningful as participants encounter them through recurring practices, interpersonal relations, pedagogical experiences, and communal routines (Hosaini et al., 2026). The article traces this process through institutional foundations, educational mediation, communal experience, and habituation, culminating in the formation of a subjective civic-moral orientation. This suggests that the public and civic significance of religious identity depends on how normative categories are translated into forms of experience that can be inhabited in daily life (Hosaini et al., 2026). In this respect, identity is socially cultivated rather than simply possessed. Religious and national identities become consequential when institutional values are embedded in repeated practices and relationships through which actors learn to interpret respect for difference, social responsibility, service, and national commitment as compatible with their Islamic moral identity. Read in this way, the Sukorejo case moves beyond a narrow account of policy implementation. Instead, it shows how an educational institution can function as a social environment in which religious and civic orientations are gradually formed through habituation.

Read together, the Danu and Sukorejo cases demonstrate distinct yet complementary modes of identity formation: identity through public performance and identity through institutional habituation. DSSYD operates through episodic but recurring public gatherings in which dispersed Danu communities assemble, perform shared religious and cultural forms, renew social connections, and become increasingly recognizable to themselves and to wider publics (Javanasami, 2026). Its formative force lies in the experience of being seen together: collective presence and performance make an otherwise dispersed identity perceptible and socially recognizable. Sukorejo *Pesantren* operates according to a different temporal and institutional logic. Rather than concentrating identity formation in periodic public events, it provides a continuous social environment in which participants encounter religious and civic values through everyday routines, pedagogical practices, communal relations, and repeated forms of participation (Hosaini et al., 2026). Its formative process may therefore be understood as learning to inhabit particular moral orientations together, as religious moderation and national commitment gradually acquire experiential meaning through habituation. The contrast between these cases is analytically productive because it shows that collective identity can be cultivated through different configurations of time, space, practice, and social interaction. This insight resonates with the perspective of lived religion, which directs attention to the rituals, stories, festivals, embodied practices, material settings, and everyday activities through which religion is actually enacted and experienced rather than restricting analysis to official doctrines, texts, or religious experts (Ammerman, 2015). From this perspective, the public significance of religious identity emerges through what people repeatedly do, experience, perform, and recognize together. The Danu and Sukorejo cases, therefore, suggest that religious and collective identities gain social force when categories of belonging are translated into shared practices and experiences through which participants come to recognize themselves and others as members of particular moral and social worlds.

Yet, visibility should not be confused with representation. The increased public visibility documented in the Danu case raises a second set of questions concerning whose symbols, narratives, and practices come to stand for the community as a whole. Once an ethnic identity becomes more publicly recognizable, it becomes necessary to ask who participates in defining its representative forms, who gains the authority to speak in the name of the community, and which cultural practices are selected as markers of an “authentic” Danu identity. These questions become especially important where a recurring festival brings geographically dispersed populations into a common representational arena. Greater coordination may strengthen collective recognition, while the same process may privilege particular versions of identity over others. Differences associated with locality, gender, generation, urban or rural experience, levels of participation, and relationships to community organizations may therefore complicate any assumption that increased visibility reflects a uniform understanding of Danu identity. Brubaker’s (2002) critique of groupism is particularly relevant here because it cautions against moving too quickly from the observable salience of an ethnic category to

assuming an internally homogeneous, clearly bounded, and collectively acting group. Visibility, representation, and internal homogeneity are analytically distinct phenomena. Public visibility necessarily involves processes of selection: particular symbols and narratives are foregrounded, repeated forms may become increasingly standardized, and some representations may gradually acquire greater authority to define the collective in public. This does not diminish the integrative significance identified by Javanasami (2026); rather, it extends the analysis from the production of visibility to the politics of representation that visibility can generate. Future research might therefore move beyond asking whether DSSYD strengthens Danu identity and examine which versions of Danu identity become publicly visible, through whose participation and authority they are produced, how competing representations are negotiated, and whose experiences remain less visible within the emerging collective image.

Read together, the Danu and Sukorejo studies support a broader movement in Religious Studies away from treating religious identity primarily as a stable classificatory variable and toward examining the social practices through which identities are continually made and remade. This shift resonates with at least three important strands of scholarship. First, the lived-religion perspective directs attention to religion as it is practiced and experienced in everyday life, including rituals, stories, festivals, embodied practices, material settings, and communal activities through which people enact religious meanings (Ammerman, 2015). Second, performance and festival studies emphasize collective events as public and participatory spaces in which communities articulate heritage, display shared symbols, and negotiate collective identity (Stoeltje, 1992). Third, constructivist approaches to ethnicity caution against treating ethnic groups as fixed and bounded entities, drawing attention instead to the processes of categorization, institutionalization, mobilization, organization, and interaction through which groupness becomes socially salient (Brubaker, 2002). These perspectives suggest a research agenda that moves beyond treating religion, ethnicity, or nationality merely as categorical variables and instead examines identity-making practices and their differentiated operation across generations, genders, classes, migration and mobility, institutional positions, internal dissent, and competing claims to representation. An especially important extension concerns digital circulation. Religious and ethnic identities that once gained public visibility primarily through physical gatherings or institutional settings now circulate through photographs, videos, livestreams, social media, and other networked platforms. Campbell's (2012) concept of networked religion, with its emphasis on networked community, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and the interconnection of online and offline religious life, provides a useful framework for examining this development. Public visibility can therefore no longer be equated with physical co-presence alone. A festival may extend beyond the event's time and place through digital representation. At the same time, institutional values cultivated within settings such as *pesantren* may circulate, be reinterpreted, contested, and appropriated across networked publics. Future research should consequently ask how different generations and social groups participate in these processes, who possesses the resources and authority to produce publicly circulating representations, how migration and mobility reshape belonging, how dissenting interpretations emerge, and which representations acquire greater legitimacy across physical and digital spaces. Such an agenda shifts the study of religious identity from asking primarily who belongs to which category toward examining how belonging is produced, performed, circulated, negotiated, and recognized across multiple social environments.

Religion becomes public when identities are performed, experienced, cultivated, and socially recognized through recurring practices and relationships. However, the production of public visibility also raises a further question: who has the authority to determine which identities, practices, narratives, and interpretations legitimately represent religion? The making of identity is therefore inseparable from the making of authority, since collective representations acquire public significance through processes of recognition, validation, and boundary-making. Moving from visibility to authority requires attention to the institutions, legal regimes, religious actors, ritual traditions, and inherited narratives through which claims about legitimate religion are produced, sustained, negotiated, and contested.

3. Religious Authority: Institutions, Law, and Boundary-Making

Religious authority is often approached through the question of who possesses it: religious scholars, clergy, charismatic leaders, educational institutions, or established organizations. Such an approach is useful, yet it can obscure a more fundamental analytical problem: how claims to authority become recognized, trusted, and socially effective in the first place. Krämer and Schmidtke (2006) provide an important point of departure by shifting attention from religious authority as an abstract quality to the plurality of religious authorities who claim, project, and exercise authority within particular social and historical contexts. Their formulation raises enduring questions concerning who is entitled to speak for religion, who may interpret and transmit legitimate religious knowledge, and how such claims are assessed by relevant audiences. Authority, from this perspective, is better understood as relational and contextual than as a fixed attribute automatically attached to an office or institutional position. Mulder (2016) develops this distinction by arguing that religious authority should be understood as a dynamic relationship in which certain words, interpretations, or forms of guidance are granted authority because they are recognized as trustworthy and meaningful, rather than simply because they originate from someone occupying a formal position. Authority, therefore, becomes effective through recognition: a claim must be accepted, validated, or institutionally sustained by those for whom it is intended to matter. The central question for this section is thus who has the authority to define legitimate religion, through what mechanisms, and for whom that authority becomes binding or persuasive. The contributions examined here approach this problem through three arenas—institutional formation, legal interpretation, and ritual memory—showing that religious authority can be cultivated through everyday institutional life, formalized through law and judicial interpretation, or sustained through recurring narratives and ritual practices.

The Sukorejo case illustrates a first mechanism through which authority becomes socially effective: institutionalization combined with habituation. Hosaini et al. (2026) show that religious moderation and national commitment acquire normative force through an institutional environment in which philosophy, leadership, curriculum, dialogical pedagogy, *bahtsul masail*, exemplary conduct, residential routines, civic activities, and social service are repeatedly integrated into everyday *pesantren* life. Their analysis distinguishes among institutional foundations, educational mediation, communal experience and habituation, and subjective civic-moral orientation, indicating that institutional authority is produced across several interconnected levels rather than through a single directive mechanism (Hosaini et al., 2026). The authority of the *pesantren*, in this sense, derives from its capacity to make particular normative orientations familiar, repeatable, socially reinforced, and experientially meaningful. Institutional authority becomes effective when normative discourse is repeatedly embedded in social practice. The *pesantren*, therefore, exercises authority less through isolated commands than through the organization of environments in which certain interpretations of religious moderation, social responsibility, and national commitment are encountered as appropriate ways of acting and relating to others. Read from this perspective, the Sukorejo study demonstrates how institutions acquire the capacity to define legitimate religious and civic conduct by translating abstract values into pedagogical routines, communal expectations, and recurring moral experiences.

The Sukorejo case also suggests that institutional authority operates through a process of moral boundary-making. When a *pesantren* repeatedly articulates and embodies particular understandings of religious moderation, social responsibility, respect for difference, and national commitment, it helps establish normative boundaries around what counts as appropriate religious and civic conduct. These boundaries concern the ways religious difference should be approached, the responsibilities attached to citizenship, and the relationship between Islamic moral commitment and national belonging. Such authority need not operate primarily through coercion or explicit command. Its effectiveness can emerge through pedagogical repetition, exemplary conduct, institutional credibility, and communal recognition, which make particular interpretations increasingly familiar, appropriate, and legitimate within the institution's social world. This understanding is consistent with Krämer and Schmidtke's (2006) broader account of religious authority as involving claims to legitimate interpretation and the recognized capacity to define and transmit religious knowledge within particular contexts. Institutional

authority, therefore, becomes socially consequential when an institution acquires the recognized capacity to shape the boundaries of appropriate belief, conduct, and belonging. In Sukorejo, these boundaries are primarily moral and pedagogical: they orient participants toward particular ways of understanding religious moderation and civic responsibility (Hosaini et al., 2026). The legal sphere introduces a different but related form of boundary-making. Whereas the *pesantren* helps establish moral boundaries through institutional practice and communal habituation, law establishes legal boundaries by determining which forms of religious expression remain protected and which may become subject to criminal sanction.

The legal sphere introduces a different form of boundary-making because it raises the question of who is authorized to distinguish criticism, religious expression, offense, hostility, and criminal conduct. Banjarani et al. (2026) approach this problem through Indonesia's transition from Article 156a(a) of the previous Criminal Code to Article 300 of the National Criminal Code. Read through the lens of religious authority, this transition can be understood as a reconfiguration of the architecture of religious authority within criminal law. Under the earlier framework, determining whether an expression constituted blasphemy depended substantially on judicial interpretation and on religious authorities whose assessments could influence how the boundaries of permissible expression were drawn (Banjarani et al., 2026). Article 300 introduces a different normative orientation by directing criminal protection more explicitly toward individuals, groups, or communities exposed to hostility, hatred, violence, or discrimination based on religion or belief, while providing greater space for certain objective, community-specific, and scientific forms of expression (Banjarani et al., 2026). This shift raises a fundamental question for the study of religion and law: what exactly is the state protecting when it regulates religious expression? A legal regime oriented toward protecting religion as an abstract sacred object creates a different configuration of authority from one centered on protecting persons and communities from concrete forms of harm. The distinction matters because each formulation structures differently who may define injury, whose interpretations become legally relevant, and which forms of expression fall within or outside criminal prohibition. Criminal-law reform, therefore, does more than modify legal language; it reconfigures the distribution of interpretive authority and redraws the legal boundary between legitimate religious expression and punishable conduct.

Legal texts do not interpret themselves. Although Article 300 restructures the normative framework governing religion-related expression, categories such as hostility, hatred, discrimination, objective expression, and scientific expression still require interpretation in concrete disputes. The central question, therefore, shifts from what the law formally states to who interprets these categories, whose interpretations acquire legal weight, and through which institutional procedures they become authoritative. Judges, prosecutors, police, religious experts, religious organizations, litigants, and other actors may all participate in this interpretive process, although their influence is rarely equal. The importance of this problem is demonstrated by A'yun and Lindsey's (2026) analysis of 106 blasphemy-related decisions between 2011 and 2022. They found that expert witnesses played an unusually influential role in these cases, with religious experts occupying a particularly prominent position in investigations, prosecutions, and judicial reasoning. Religious experts affiliated with established authorities were frequently preferred by police and prosecutors, and their views were often incorporated into judicial assessments of whether particular statements or actions constituted blasphemy (A'yun & Lindsey, 2026). These findings reveal how legal authority and religious authority can become institutionally entangled. The legal system determines which actors may appear as experts and gives their testimony procedural relevance, while religious experts provide interpretive judgments that help legal institutions determine the religious meaning and offensiveness of contested expressions. Authority, therefore, circulates between legal and religious institutions rather than remaining exclusively located in either domain. This circulation raises an important question for the post-reform framework examined by Banjarani et al. (2026): whether Article 300 will substantially alter patterns of interpretive authority in practice, or whether new legal terminology will continue to be mediated through established relationships among state institutions, religious organizations, and expert knowledge. Future research should therefore examine the empirical implementation of Article 300,

paying particular attention to who is recognized as an authoritative interpreter, how competing expert claims are evaluated, and whether the reform produces a substantive redistribution of interpretive authority or primarily a change in legal vocabulary.

However, religious authority is not produced exclusively through formal institutions or legal systems. Kusdiana et al. (2026), in their study of the *Azan Pitu* (literally, Seven Calls to Prayer) tradition in Cirebon, demonstrate how ritual authority can be sustained even when the historical narratives associated with its origins are neither singular nor fully consistent. Their examination of textual sources, historiographical accounts, oral traditions, contemporary scholarship, cultural documentation, and media representations reveals significant differences in how the emergence of *Azan Pitu* has been narrated. Some sources describe a protective call to prayer performed by a single figure, while others recount disturbances, fires, or threats surrounding the mosque without referring to seven muezzins (callers to prayer); the now-familiar representation of seven muezzins becomes more explicit in oral, academic, and contemporary accounts (Kusdiana et al., 2026). Despite these differences, the narratives repeatedly converge around motifs of crisis, sacred space, protection, spiritual authority, sacred voice, loss, and the restoration of order. Kusdiana et al. (2026) conceptualize this process as cumulative narrative legitimation, in which historically non-identical and sometimes contradictory narratives continue to provide symbolic resources through which ritual authority is articulated and sustained. Narratives are transmitted across generations, reactivated through ritual practice, reinforced through collective memory, and repeatedly recognized as meaningful within contemporary representations of the tradition. Authority, in this context, derives from the cumulative social force of these interconnected acts of transmission, enactment, remembrance, and recognition. Ritual authority may therefore rest less on a single recoverable origin than on the accumulated capacity of narratives, practices, and memories to sustain recognition over time. The *Azan Pitu* case thus expands the analysis of religious authority beyond formally authorized actors, showing that authority can also reside in the ongoing relationship among narrative, ritual performance, sacred place, and communal memory.

The Sukorejo, blasphemy law, and *Azan Pitu* studies reveal three distinct mechanisms by which religious legitimacy becomes socially effective: institutional formation, legal authorization, and ritual-memory transmission. At Sukorejo, authority develops through institutional habituation, as normative values acquire credibility and practical force through pedagogy, leadership, communal routines, and repeated moral experience (Hosaini et al., 2026). In regulating religion-related expression, authority operates through legal categorization and interpretation, as statutory provisions, judicial institutions, and religious expertise participate in determining the boundary between protected expression and punishable conduct (Banjarani et al., 2026). In the *Azan Pitu* tradition, authority is sustained through a different temporal process: narratives, ritual repetition, sacred associations, and cultural memory accumulate across generations and continue to provide legitimacy even in the absence of a single consistent historical account (Kusdiana et al., 2026). Each case, therefore, poses a different question, yet they share a common relational structure. A claim becomes authoritative when it is recognized by relevant actors, reinforced through institutional arrangements or repeated social practices, and sustained sufficiently to shape subsequent interpretation, judgment, and conduct. Religious authority is, in this sense, a relational achievement rather than a self-evident property of particular persons or institutions. This perspective resonates with Bhojani and Clarke's (2023) critique of approaches that personify religious authority primarily in clerical figures. Their analysis of epistemic authority in the Shi'i diaspora shifts attention to the diverse ways in which authoritative knowledge is received, appropriated, and used by non-specialists in ordinary social life. Authority consequently resides in relationships among claims, sources of knowledge, institutional settings, practices of recognition, and the actors who decide whether particular guidance provides a compelling reason for action. The three cases in this issue similarly demonstrate that religious authority becomes consequential through processes that connect those who make or transmit authoritative claims with institutions, practices, memories, and publics that recognize and reproduce their legitimacy.

Authority does more than legitimate; it also draws boundaries. The three cases examined here illustrate this boundary-making function in different ways. At Sukorejo, institutional authority helps

distinguish moral orientations considered appropriate from those regarded as less compatible with the *pesantren's* understanding of religious moderation, social responsibility, and national commitment (Hosaini et al., 2026). In the legal regulation of religion-related expression, boundary-making becomes more explicit because legal and judicial authorities distinguish protected forms of expression from conduct that may become subject to criminal sanction (Banjarani et al., 2026). In the *Azan Pitu* tradition, boundary-making occurs through processes of narrative transmission and ritual recognition: some narratives, motifs, and practices become increasingly associated with the legitimate representation of the ritual, while others may acquire less authority within the evolving field of cultural memory (Kusdiana et al., 2026). These processes do not imply that religious authority is inherently coercive or exclusionary. They do, however, indicate that legitimation and exclusion are analytically connected possibilities of boundary-making. Whenever certain interpretations acquire greater authority, alternative interpretations may occupy weaker positions within the same religious, institutional, or legal field. The study of religious authority should therefore attend simultaneously to recognition, contestation, asymmetry, and exclusion: who acquires the capacity to define legitimate religion, which audiences recognize that capacity, which forms of knowledge are treated as authoritative, who can challenge established interpretations, and whose voices remain less visible within authorized representations. Boundaries may also shift as audiences, institutions, political conditions, or media environments change, reminding us that authority is neither permanent nor universally recognized. The critical question is therefore not simply who speaks for religion, but who is authorized to define religion, who recognizes that authority, and whose interpretations remain outside the authorized boundary.

These studies suggest that future research should move beyond models in which religious authority is imagined primarily as a linear relationship between religious leader and follower. The cases examined in this issue instead point toward what may be described here as an authority ecology: an analytical formulation for understanding religious authority as distributed among interconnected actors, institutions, media, practices, and forms of knowledge. Such an ecology may include religious institutions, scholars and religious experts, educational organizations, state agencies, courts, legal texts, ritual specialists, communities, historical narratives, media systems, digital platforms, and increasingly algorithmic infrastructures. Krämer and Schmidtke's (2006) emphasis on the plurality of religious authorities already demonstrates that authority emerges through relationships among knowledge, conduct, charisma, institutions, and state power rather than residing in a single type of actor. More recent work similarly questions the tendency to personify religious authority in religious professionals alone. Bhojani and Clarke (2023), for example, show how epistemic authority acquires meaning through the diverse ways non-specialists receive, appropriate, and use authoritative knowledge in everyday life. Digital religion further expands this ecology. Campbell (2010, 2023) shows that online environments can reorganize authority across roles, structures, texts, and ideologies, while also generating new forms of religious leadership whose influence derives in part from digital communication skills and platform visibility rather than from conventional training or institutional appointment. Contemporary digital environments therefore require attention to the infrastructures that condition which religious voices become visible and repeatable: follower networks, search systems, recommendation mechanisms, platform metrics, virality, verification practices, and increasingly AI-mediated forms of religious information.

Recent scholarship on Muslim digital environments further demonstrates that advanced technologies are changing the conditions under which religious authority is produced, recognized, circulated, and contested. A systematic review by Wahid and Abdulloh (2026) shows that digital platforms reconfigure Islamic religious authority by introducing new forms of legitimacy within algorithmically structured environments, where authority is increasingly negotiated through interactions among religious knowledge, affect, technological mediation, and algorithmic visibility. Zaid et al. (2026) make this relational transformation especially clear in their study of young Muslims across several Arab societies: religious credibility can emerge through trust, peer proximity, networked participation, and algorithmic visibility, allowing everyday influencers without formal religious

credentials to shape lived religious practice alongside established scholars. Digital mediation, therefore, pluralizes the actors and mechanisms through which authority is recognized rather than simply replacing traditional authority with digital personalities. Atallah (2026) extends this problem into the domains of algorithmic infrastructures and AI-assisted religious guidance, showing that digital fatwa environments are increasingly organized by visibility metrics, platform logics, audience engagement, and algorithmic amplification, with implications for epistemic legitimacy, institutional gatekeeping, and accountability. These developments suggest that technological infrastructures should be treated as active conditions in the contemporary organization of religious authority because they influence which voices become discoverable, repeatable, and publicly credible. The question for Religious Studies consequently expands from who speaks for religion to who or what makes particular religious voices visible, credible, authoritative, and repeatable. Religious authority must therefore be examined through the broader institutional, technological, epistemic, and networked infrastructures through which religious knowledge is produced, selected, circulated, recognized, and contested.

Religion becomes public when claims about legitimate belief, practice, expression, and tradition acquire recognized authority. The cases examined in this section show that such authority can be cultivated through institutional life, formalized through law and judicial interpretation, or sustained through ritual repetition and cultural memory. Across these different settings, authority remains relational: it depends on recognition, institutional support, interpretive practices, and the capacity to establish boundaries that become meaningful for particular publics. Once religious authority enters legal and political institutions, however, questions of legitimacy become increasingly entangled with citizenship, state power, representation, inclusion, and conflict. The analytical focus must therefore move from who defines legitimate religion to how religious claims, identities, and authorities operate within broader structures of governance and political power. This shift opens the next discussion on religion, governance, citizenship, and violence.

4. Religion, Governance, Citizenship, and Violence

Religious authority becomes politically consequential when religious claims, identities, and institutions enter wider structures of governance. Governance, in this sense, should not be reduced to state control or formal regulation of religion. It encompasses the broader institutional and political processes through which representation is organized, laws are formulated, public policies are negotiated, citizenship is defined, coalitions are constructed, institutional bargains are reached, security is managed, and rights and resources are distributed. Religious actors and claims become politically significant when they gain access to these arenas and acquire the capacity to influence how collective interests, public obligations, and legitimate forms of belonging are defined. The central question, therefore, shifts from who has the authority to define legitimate religion to the institutional and political conditions under which religious claims become consequential for governance, citizenship, and security. Religion does not enter politics as an already autonomous force whose effects can be inferred from religious identity alone. Its political consequences are mediated by institutions, political networks, legal arrangements, patterns of representation, historically specific citizenship regimes, and the actors who translate religious claims into demands, policies, alliances, or forms of mobilization. Religious authority becomes politically consequential, therefore, when it acquires institutional access, legal recognition, political representation, organizational capacity, or the ability to mobilize constituencies within wider structures of power. This perspective directs attention away from abstract claims about the political influence of religion and toward the specific mechanisms through which religious meanings become connected to governance and produce differentiated consequences across political contexts.

Katz's (2026) analysis of religion, national identity, and democratic governance in Israel provides a clear illustration of this institutional mediation. His findings show that religious influence on policymaking is neither uniform nor reducible to society's general religiosity; rather, it is domain-specific, coalition-dependent, and institutionally mediated, operating differently across areas such as personal status, education, public funding, military service, and broader religion-state arrangements.

The analytical significance of this finding lies in the mechanisms through which religious interests acquire political effect. Religious claims become consequential when they are articulated through political parties, incorporated into coalition bargaining, translated into administrative categories, embedded in legal arrangements, and negotiated within policy-making processes. Coalition leverage, institutional access, and legally recognized arrangements can therefore amplify some religious claims while limiting others, depending on the political domain and institutional setting in which they operate. Religion becomes politically consequential when religious claims are translated into institutional access, coalition leverage, policy categories, and legally recognized arrangements. This shifts the analysis away from asking simply how religious a society is and toward a more precise institutional question: through which institutions does religious difference acquire political effect? Katz's study thus demonstrates that the political significance of religion lies less in the abstract presence of religious identity than in the channels through which that identity becomes connected to representation, bargaining, administration, law, and public policy.

The institutional mediation of religion also makes citizenship a politics of belonging. Citizenship is more than a formal legal status; it is a framework through which belonging, recognition, rights, obligations, political participation, and access to institutions are organized. Katz's (2026) study makes this dimension particularly visible by showing that Jewish national identity has explicit constitutional expression. At the same time, patterns of minority recognition, political inclusion, and social cohesion vary across communities and institutional contexts. These findings shift attention from the presence of religious or national identities themselves to the institutional arrangements through which such identities acquire differentiated political significance. The relevant questions are therefore: who is recognized as part of the national community; how religious and national identities become institutionally connected; how forms of group autonomy are negotiated alongside equal citizenship; and under what conditions institutional recognition strengthens inclusion or produces asymmetries in political belonging. This broader framing is consistent with scholarship on religion and democratic citizenship, which examines how religion intersects with civic participation, individual rights, recognition of others as citizens, social cohesion, and citizenship education across religiously diverse and secular societies (Unser, 2021). Citizenship, from this perspective, is one of the principal arenas in which religious difference is translated into institutional categories of membership and participation. Religion becomes public through citizenship when religious and national identities become embedded in institutional definitions of belonging, rights, obligations, and political representation.

The relationship between religion and democratic governance should not be framed as a simple opposition between religious influence and secular democracy. Comparative scholarship increasingly suggests that the more productive question concerns the institutional configuration through which religion, state authority, national identity, and citizenship are connected. Cesari and Fox (2016), for example, shift the analysis away from broad claims about particular religious traditions being inherently compatible or incompatible with democracy and toward the institutional conditions under which religion acquires hegemonic status. Their analysis shows that religion becomes politically significant when it is linked to material and political privileges, religiously informed laws and education, and definitions of national identity and citizenship. Brathwaite and Bramsen (2011) similarly demonstrate that the relationship between religion-state separation and democracy is better understood as multidimensional than as a simple binary between separation and establishment. Read alongside Katz (2026), these studies reinforce an institutional approach in which the democratic consequences of religion depend on how representation is organized, how religious autonomy is accommodated, how equal citizenship is protected, how competing claims are negotiated, and which institutions are authorized to resolve disputes over religion, rights, and public obligations. Institutional recognition can facilitate participation and protect religious autonomy, while particular arrangements can also produce asymmetries when political privileges, representation, rights, or obligations are distributed unevenly across communities. Katz's call for mechanisms capable of balancing religious autonomy, accountable representation, and equal citizenship, therefore, speaks to a wider comparative problem in the study of religion and democracy. The relevant analytical question is not whether religion

is compatible with democracy in the abstract, but how particular institutional arrangements organize the political consequences of religious difference.

Governance also matters because institutional weakness can shape the environments in which religious and political mobilization becomes violent. Ottuh et al. (2026) demonstrate this dynamic in Nigeria, where political and religious radicalism develop within what they describe as overlapping ecologies of violence rather than as two entirely separate systems. Political radicalism operates through electoral violence, patronage networks, identity-based mobilization, informal armed actors, and the politicization of resource conflicts, while religious radicalism persists through insurgent organizations such as JAS/Boko Haram and ISWAP. The analytical significance of the study lies in showing how these configurations become interconnected within a broader environment of political instability, weak protection, and recurring insecurity. Religious radicalism, in this context, cannot be isolated from the political and institutional settings in which armed organizations recruit, operate, obtain resources, and interact with other coercive actors. Nor can political violence be understood independently of the identity claims, organizational structures, and ideological narratives through which mobilization acquires legitimacy and social force. The Nigerian case, therefore, redirects analysis from asking whether religion causes violence toward examining how religious mobilization becomes embedded in wider political, organizational, and institutional conditions that enable violence to persist. The analytical significance of the Nigerian case lies less in demonstrating that religion produces violence than in showing how religious radicalism becomes embedded in wider political and institutional environments of insecurity.

The convergence identified by Ottuh et al. (2026) becomes clearer when attention shifts from ideological mobilization to the organizational and material infrastructures that allow violence to persist. Religious and political mobilization can become interconnected through armed networks, patronage relations, informal coercive actors, kidnapping, and illicit economies that provide both resources and opportunities for continued violence. These networks do more than express political or religious grievances; they can generate material capacities through extortion, abduction, illegal levies, and other coercive practices, while weak state protection limits institutions' ability to disrupt these connections or protect affected communities. Violence is therefore reproduced through a mutually reinforcing process in which mobilization creates opportunities for armed and criminal networks, illicit economies sustain those networks, and institutional weakness allows coercive practices to continue. The consequences extend far beyond episodes of direct attack. Ottuh et al. (2026) show that recurring insecurity contributes to forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, disrupted access to education and basic services, weakening social cohesion, and broader forms of human insecurity. These effects can themselves reshape the social conditions in which further mobilization becomes possible by intensifying vulnerability, distrust, exclusion, and dependence on informal structures of protection. Violence becomes durable when ideological mobilization is connected to organizational networks, material resources, coercive infrastructures, and conditions of weak protection. The Nigerian case, therefore, demonstrates that the persistence of violence cannot be explained by religious extremism alone; it must be traced through the political, economic, organizational, and institutional mechanisms that enable violent networks to reproduce themselves over time.

Religion should not become an explanatory shortcut for violence. The presence of religious language, religious actors, or religious identities within a conflict does not establish religion as its singular or sufficient cause. A more precise analysis asks what religion actually does within a particular configuration of violence: whether religious language legitimates action, constructs boundaries between communities, supplies moral narratives, supports recruitment, provides organizational resources, generates solidarity, or offers justifications for coercion. These functions must then be examined alongside political patronage, state capacity, competition for power and resources, illicit economies, armed networks, socioeconomic insecurity, and other conditions that shape when mobilization becomes violent and how violence is sustained. Ottuh et al. (2026) support precisely this relational approach by locating political radicalism, religious radicalism, economies of violence, and institutional weakness within an interconnected analytical framework. Religion may therefore

constitute an important dimension of violent mobilization without operating independently of the political, material, and institutional relationships through which its meanings acquire practical force. This distinction is crucial for Religious Studies because reducing violence to religious ideology risks mistaking the visibility of religious discourse for a complete causal explanation, while excluding religion altogether would overlook the ways religious meanings may organize legitimacy, identity, solidarity, and action. The presence of religion in violence does not by itself explain violence; explanation requires tracing how religious meanings become connected to political interests, organizational networks, material resources, and structures of insecurity.

Read comparatively, the Israeli and Nigerian cases reveal different pathways through which religion acquires political consequence without implying that the two political contexts are institutionally or historically equivalent. Katz (2026) demonstrates a predominantly formal mode of institutional mediation in which religious claims become consequential through political parties, coalition arrangements, law, public institutions, policy processes, and citizenship regimes. Ottuh et al. (2026), by contrast, illuminate a more networked political-security configuration in which religious radicalism becomes consequential through its interaction with political mobilization, armed networks, patronage relations, illicit economies, informal coercive actors, weak protection, and wider structures of insecurity. The distinction is analytically important because it shows that the political significance of religion cannot be inferred from religious identity itself. It depends on the channels through which religious claims, symbols, organizations, and actors become connected to structures capable of distributing authority, resources, recognition, coercive capacity, or protection. In one setting, these channels operate primarily through formal institutions of representation, bargaining, law, and citizenship; in another, political consequences emerge through interactions among formal governance, informal networks, armed actors, and economies of violence. The two cases demonstrate that the political effects of religion depend on the channels through which religious identities and claims are connected to wider structures of power. Religion becomes politically consequential through institutional mediation and networked connection, rather than through religious identity alone.

These cases suggest the value of a relational approach to religion and governance for Global Religious Studies. Such an approach begins from the premise that the public consequences of religion cannot be understood adequately through a simple relationship between religion and the state. Religious claims move through multiple institutional and networked relationships among religious organizations, political parties, states, courts, bureaucracies, citizenship regimes, security agencies, civil society organizations, armed groups, economic networks, media systems, and transnational actors. The analytical task is therefore to trace how religious meanings and identities travel across these relationships, where they acquire institutional recognition or organizational capacity, and how their effects change as they enter different political, legal, economic, and security settings. Scholarship on religion, citizenship, and democracy similarly demonstrates the importance of examining rights, recognition, participation, and social cohesion across diverse religious and secular contexts, rather than assuming a single model of religion-state relations (Unser, 2021). For Global Religious Studies, the guiding question becomes: Through which institutional, political, economic, and networked configurations do religious claims become publicly consequential? Addressing this question requires more comparative attention to formal and informal institutions, differentiated citizenship, minority recognition, political economy, state capacity, transnational religious networks, security infrastructures, and increasingly digital forms of political mobilization. Such an agenda would allow scholars to compare how similar religious claims yield different consequences across political systems, while also examining how institutions and networks reshape what counts as a religious interest, actor, or public claim.

Religion becomes politically consequential when religious identities, claims, and authorities are connected to institutions and networks that organize representation, citizenship, resources, security, and power. The cases examined in this section show that these connections can take very different forms. In Katz's (2026) analysis, formal institutions mediate the political influence of religion through party competition, coalition bargaining, legal arrangements, public institutions, and citizenship

regimes. In Ottuh et al. (2026), political and religious radicalisms become mutually consequential within wider ecologies of violence in which armed networks, political mobilization, illicit economies, weak protection, and structures of insecurity interact. Governance, therefore, concerns the conditions under which religious difference is institutionally organized, politically represented, socially included or differentiated, and, under particular conditions, connected to structures of insecurity and violence. Political consequentiality, however, is only one dimension of how religion becomes public. Religious worlds also acquire continuity through forms that can outlast particular political arrangements and moments: narratives that preserve representations of the past, rituals that repeatedly reactivate them, sacred sounds and embodied practices that make them sensorially present, and places and material objects that give inherited meanings durable form. The analysis, therefore, turns from how religion becomes politically consequential to how it becomes publicly durable across time.

5. Ritual, Cultural Memory, and Material Religion

Religious continuity is often explained through the persistence of belief, the transmission of doctrine, or the reproduction of religious institutions. These dimensions remain important, but they do not fully explain how religion endures as a publicly recognizable presence across generations. Religious worlds are also carried through ritual repetition, sacred sound, collective memory, material objects, architecture, bodily practices, and spatial arrangements that allow the past to be encountered again in the present. Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory provides an important point of departure for understanding this durability. Building on the social character of memory, Assmann (2005) argues that memory also acquires a cultural dimension when representations of the past are stabilized and transmitted through forms that extend beyond individual recollection, including religious rites, festivals, canonical texts, symbolic codes, and other media. Cultural memory, therefore, concerns the ways communities preserve and reactivate meaningful pasts through socially organized forms of remembrance, while ritual itself can function as a medium through which memory is repeatedly enacted and sustained (Assmann, 2005). From this perspective, religious durability depends on the social forms through which the past is repeatedly remembered, enacted, sensed, and materially encountered rather than on the preservation of ideas alone. The relevant question for Religious Studies consequently expands from how doctrines and institutions survive to how ritual, memory, sound, materiality, and space make religion publicly durable across generations. The *Azan Pitu* tradition in Cirebon provides a particularly revealing entry point to this problem because its ritual significance endures despite the absence of a single, historically uniform account of its origins, suggesting that religious continuity may depend as much on the social transmission and reactivation of memory as on narrative consistency.

The *Azan Pitu* case becomes especially significant when historical reconstruction is distinguished from cultural memory. Historical reconstruction asks what most probably occurred in the past based on available evidence, source provenance, chronology, and critical comparison. In contrast, cultural memory asks how representations of the past are preserved, transmitted, and made meaningful in the present. Kusdiana et al. (2026) show that the textual sources, historiographical accounts, oral traditions, contemporary scholarship, cultural documentation, and media representations associated with *Azan Pitu* do not converge on a single, fully consistent account of the ritual's origins. From the standpoint of historical reconstruction, such differences constitute a problem of evidence and narrative consistency; from the perspective of Religious Studies, however, the persistence of these different accounts is itself a phenomenon requiring explanation. Assmann's (2011) framework is useful here because cultural memory depends on forms of externalization and transmission through which selected representations of the past can extend beyond individual recollection and acquire continuity across generations. These representations are sustained through symbolic forms, institutional frameworks, ritual repetition, and media that allow communities to reactivate the past within changing presents. The coexistence of different *Azan Pitu* narratives can therefore be examined in terms of both their historical credibility and their continuing capacity to organize collective remembrance. Historical reconstruction and cultural

memory address different dimensions of the past: one evaluates evidentiary probability, while the other examines how representations of the past continue to organize meaning in the present. This distinction makes it possible to investigate the social durability of *Azan Pitu* without requiring narrative consistency as a precondition for cultural significance.

The coexistence of these different narratives becomes analytically productive through Kusdiana et al.'s (2026) concept of cumulative narrative legitimation. The concept suggests that the continuity of a ritual does not require diverse accounts of its past to be consolidated into a single homogeneous origin story. Instead, narratives circulate through different media and social settings, while particular motifs persist across their variations. In the *Azan Pitu* case, accounts that differ in historical detail repeatedly invoke themes of crisis, protection, sacred space, sacred voice, spiritual authority, loss, and the restoration of order (Kusdiana et al., 2026). Their recurrence creates symbolic connections among otherwise non-identical versions of the past. Ritual practice continually reactivates these associations; the sound of the *azan* gives them an embodied, sensory presence; oral transmission renews them within communal life; and scholarship, cultural documentation, and media representations provide additional channels through which the narratives continue to circulate. Communities can therefore recognize the ritual as meaningful even when the stories attached to it remain historically heterogeneous. This mechanism resonates with Assmann's account of cultural memory, in which the past acquires durability by being encoded and transmitted through symbolic forms, rites, festivals, texts, narratives, and other media that enable remembrance to extend beyond individual experience (Assmann, 2005, 2011). Cultural continuity, from this perspective, does not depend on the passive storage of factual recollection; it is generated through repeated acts of representation and reactivation that connect inherited meanings with successive presents. Ritual continuity may therefore be sustained through the accumulation of partially different memories whose symbolic convergence is more socially consequential than their narrative uniformity. The concept of cumulative narrative legitimation thus offers a way to explain how heterogeneous representations of the past can collectively sustain the recognizability and significance of a religious tradition across time.

Taking cultural memory seriously does not require abandoning historical criticism. The analytical value of memory lies precisely in distinguishing questions about the historical status of a narrative from questions about its social effectiveness. Historical inquiry remains concerned with evidentiary basis, chronology, provenance, source criticism, corroboration, and the relative probability of competing accounts. The study of cultural memory addresses a different set of questions: what communities remember, why particular versions of the past endure, how narratives are transmitted and reactivated, how they orient ritual practice, and how remembered pasts contribute to collective belonging. Historical plausibility and social efficacy are therefore analytically distinct. A narrative may become socially powerful, ritually consequential, and widely remembered without thereby constituting the strongest available reconstruction of what historically occurred. Conversely, an account supported by stronger historical evidence may have limited resonance within the memory practices through which a community understands its religious past. The *Azan Pitu* case makes this distinction particularly important because the coexistence of different narratives invites scholars to investigate both the evidentiary histories of those accounts and the processes through which some of them continue to organize contemporary meaning (Kusdiana et al., 2026). Religious Studies can therefore take remembered pasts seriously as social facts while retaining the critical procedures necessary for evaluating historical claims. The methodological challenge can be formulated as a broader question: How can Religious Studies explain the social power of remembered pasts without collapsing memory into history or historical criticism into disbelief?

If *Azan Pitu* demonstrates how religion endures through narrative and ritual memory, the Kudus Minaret shows how religious meaning can also acquire durability through material form. Muhtador et al. (2026) present the minaret as a historically layered religious artifact whose architectural form, association with Sunan Kudus (a revered Javanese Muslim saint), and continuing presence in contemporary Muslim life make it simultaneously an architectural structure, a historical trace, a social symbol, and a site of ongoing interpretation. Its significance, therefore, lies in the ways its material

presence enables inherited narratives and religious meanings to remain available for contemporary encounters. This perspective resonates with Birgit Meyer's approach to religion as a practice of mediation, in which religious experience is formed through the interaction of media, bodies, senses, and socially authorized forms rather than through disembodied meaning alone (Meyer, 2008). Her concept of *sensational forms* is particularly useful because it directs attention to relatively fixed modes through which religious worlds become accessible and compelling through sensory and material experience. Architecture can operate in precisely this manner: it organizes space, directs visual attention, evokes inherited narratives, facilitates bodily movement, and provides a durable material setting in which religious memory can be repeatedly encountered. The Kudus Minaret can thus be approached as more than a representation of a completed historical past. Its continued material presence mediates relationships between historical narratives and contemporary experience, allowing successive publics to see, inhabit, interpret, and reinterpret the religious past from within changing social contexts. The Kudus Minaret can therefore be approached as a material medium of religious memory through which historical narratives become spatially and sensorially available in the present.

The material turn in Religious Studies extends this argument by challenging approaches that privilege texts, doctrines, and articulated beliefs as the primary locations of religious meaning. Religious worlds are equally constituted through buildings, images, objects, dress, sound, smell, gesture, spatial movement, and bodily experience. Meyer (2008) emphasizes that media and *sensational forms* are intrinsic to the formation of religious experience because they organize how bodies and senses encounter what communities recognize as religiously significant. Her broader work on *aesthetic formations* similarly draws attention to the ways religion, media, sensory experience, and collective forms of attachment become intertwined in the production of religious communities and publics (Meyer, 2009). Material forms therefore participate actively in the transmission of religion: they structure perception, orient bodily practices, stabilize particular associations, and provide sensory conditions through which inherited meanings can be encountered again. A religious monument does not simply preserve a message from the past; its continued presence allows religious meanings to be revisited, interpreted, embodied, and socially circulated. The Kudus Minaret illustrates this process particularly well. Its Hindu-Javanese architectural form, narratives associated with Sunan Kudus, the remembered prohibition on cattle slaughter, pilgrimage practices, continuing mosque use, and contemporary interpretations intersect within a material-symbolic field in which architecture, memory, bodily practice, and social meaning continually inform one another (Muhtador et al., 2026). The significance of the minaret, therefore, lies in its capacity to remain materially present while supporting successive acts of interpretation, remembrance, and embodied encounter, making religious heritage an ongoing social process rather than a static residue of the past.

Material continuity should not be equated with uniform social meaning. The enduring presence of the Kudus Minaret and its association with histories of cultural encounter do not, by themselves, guarantee that the monument will generate the same interpretation or social disposition among contemporary publics. Muhtador et al. (2026) themselves indicate that contemporary interpretations of the minaret and the traditions associated with Sunan Kudus are not entirely uniform, underscoring the importance of distinguishing the historical symbolism of acculturation from its present social effects. Historical symbols of coexistence can provide cultural resources that can be mobilized to support tolerance. Still, their effects depend on how they are interpreted, institutionally framed, taught, commemorated, displayed to visitors, and situated within changing intergroup and political contexts. A material-religion perspective, therefore, requires attention to the publics that encounter heritage and the interpretive practices through which material forms acquire contemporary significance. Future research might ask who reads the Kudus Minaret as a symbol of tolerance, how religious leaders articulate its significance, whether local residents and pilgrims interpret it in similar ways, how younger generations engage with its inherited meanings, and how tourism reshapes the relationship between sacred heritage and cultural consumption. Further questions arise about whether official heritage narratives align with everyday interpretations and how photography, short-form video, social media, and other digital forms transform the minaret into circulating visual content that is detached

from, or reconnected to, its local religious setting. Material objects endure physically, but their meanings remain socially negotiated. The analytical task is therefore to examine how durable religious forms acquire different meanings across audiences, institutions, generations, and media environments rather than assuming that historical acculturation automatically reproduces contemporary tolerance.

Read comparatively, the Danu festival, *Azan Pitu*, and the Kudus Minaret can be understood as distinct modes of religious mediation through which religious worlds become perceptible, memorable, and publicly available. In the Danu festival, collective performance, dress, bodily presence, symbolic display, ritual participation, and gathering make religious and ethnic belonging visible through repeated public enactment (Javanasami, 2026). In *Azan Pitu*, sacred sound, narrative transmission, and ritual repetition allow remembered pasts to be reactivated across time, giving cultural memory an audible and performative form (Kusdiana et al., 2026). The Kudus Minaret introduces another modality: architecture and material heritage provide religious memory with a durable spatial presence that can be inhabited, viewed, interpreted, and revisited by successive publics (Muhtador et al., 2026). The three cases reveal different modalities through which religious worlds become publicly available: performance makes religion visible, ritual sound and narrative make it repeatable and memorable, while architecture gives religious memory a durable spatial form. Meyer's (2008) theory of mediation helps clarify why these differences matter. Media are not neutral channels carrying pre-existing religious meanings; their sensory, material, and performative qualities help shape how religion is experienced and recognized. Assmann's (2005, 2011) account of cultural memory similarly emphasizes that collective remembrance requires transmissible carriers, symbolic forms, rituals, and media through which representations of the past can extend beyond individual memory. Performance, sound, narrative, and architecture therefore participate differently in the production of religious continuity, while each provides a form through which communities can encounter inherited meanings in the present. Religious durability is therefore multimodal: it depends on what communities repeatedly perform, hear, see, inhabit, remember, and materially preserve.

These studies support a broader move toward what may be described here as a multimodal approach to Religious Studies. The term is used here as an editorial analytical formulation for an approach that examines how religious meaning emerges through relationships among text, body, sound, object, space, image, performance, memory, and media rather than treating any single mode as the privileged location of religion. Such an approach expands the questions scholars bring to religious worlds. Alongside asking what religious texts say or what believers articulate, Religious Studies can ask: What is heard? What is seen? What is performed? What is touched? What is spatially organized? What is remembered? What is digitally circulated?

Meyer's work on mediation and *sensational forms* provides an important foundation for this orientation by situating materiality, media, aesthetics, senses, bodies, and the organization of religious experience within the analytical field itself (Meyer, 2008). Continuing methodological discussions within *Material Religion*, including Meyer's recent reflections on methodology and metaphysics (Meyer, 2026), indicate that questions concerning how scholars conceptualize and study the material dimensions of religion remain active within the field. A multimodal approach should now extend these questions into digitally mediated environments. Religious heritage circulates through photographs of sacred sites, recordings of sacred sound, livestreamed rituals, virtual tours, short-form videos, platformed heritage, and increasingly AI-generated representations. These formats do more than reproduce an already existing religious object or practice: they reorganize scale, visibility, sensory access, temporality, circulation, and the publics through which religious forms are encountered. Digitization does not eliminate materiality; it creates new material and sensory conditions through which religious heritage becomes visible, repeatable, and reinterpretable. Future Religious Studies can therefore investigate how physical and digital modalities interact in making religious worlds perceptible, memorable, authoritative, and publicly durable across different social settings.

Religion becomes publicly durable when religious worlds are repeatedly remembered, embodied, sounded, performed, spatialized, and materialized. The cases of *Azan Pitu*, the Kudus Minaret, and the Danu festival demonstrate that religious continuity extends beyond doctrinal transmission to the media

and practices through which inherited meanings remain perceptible across generations. Narratives make the past meaningful, rituals reactivate it, sacred sound gives memory sensory presence, architecture provides durable spatial form, and collective performance renews religious and communal meanings through participation. These processes show that continuity is neither simple preservation nor unchanged repetition; religious worlds endure because they are repeatedly mediated, encountered, interpreted, and reactivated within changing social contexts. Religious Studies, therefore, needs to examine the practices and media through which religion becomes perceptible, memorable, and publicly durable while maintaining analytical distinctions among historical reconstruction, cultural memory, and contemporary interpretation. The durability of religion lies in this continuing capacity of religious worlds to be remembered, sensed, inhabited, and made meaningful again.

6. Conclusion

The central question animating this editorial has been deceptively simple: How does religion become public? The studies gathered in this issue suggest that public religion is produced through four interconnected processes. First, religion acquires visibility when identities and forms of belonging are performed, displayed, and collectively recognized through festivals, gatherings, bodily presence, and other public practices. Second, religion acquires authority when particular interpretations of belief, conduct, expression, and tradition receive recognition through institutions, education, expertise, law, judicial interpretation, or ritual legitimation. Third, religion becomes politically consequential when religious claims, identities, and authorities become connected to states, citizenship regimes, democratic institutions, political networks, legal arrangements, and structures of security and violence. Fourth, religion acquires durability through mediation and memory, as narratives, rituals, sacred sound, architecture, material objects, and embodied practices repeatedly render religious worlds perceptible and meaningful across time. These mechanisms frequently intersect. Visibility can generate claims to authority; authority can enter structures of governance; governance can reshape the conditions under which identities are recognized; and memory and materiality can provide symbolic resources through which religious claims remain publicly available. Religion becomes public, therefore, through processes that make it visible, authoritative, politically consequential, and socially durable.

The larger theoretical implication is that religion should neither be treated as an autonomous force operating independently of social conditions nor reduced to an epiphenomenon of politics, culture, ethnicity, or economics. The articles in this issue show instead that the public consequences of religion emerge relationally through the institutions, networks, media, materials, memories, spaces, and practices through which religious meanings are produced, authorized, circulated, negotiated, and contested. A festival does not become politically or socially significant through religious meaning alone; its significance develops through collective performance, recognition, and organizational connection. Institutional values acquire normative force through pedagogy, habituation, and communal recognition. Religious expression becomes legally consequential through categories, interpreters, experts, and judicial institutions. Religious narratives endure through ritual repetition and cultural memory, while material objects acquire public significance through changing practices of interpretation. Religion is therefore best understood here as a relational and mediated public force whose effects emerge from the configurations through which religious meanings become socially consequential. This formulation preserves the specificity of religion while locating its public effects within the relationships that enable religious meanings to act in the world.

Such a perspective also points to several reductions that contemporary Religious Studies should resist. Religion cannot be adequately equated with belief, because religious worlds are enacted through bodies, rituals, senses, objects, spaces, and everyday practices. It cannot be reduced to an institution, because religious meanings are continuously lived, interpreted, appropriated, and contested by actors whose experiences may extend beyond institutional formulations. Nor should religion be treated as a fixed identity, since collective identities are repeatedly produced through performance, recognition, boundary-making, and changing relations with others. Particular caution is required when religion is invoked as an explanatory cause of political behavior, conflict, radicalism, or violence. Religious

language, affiliation, and symbolism may be important, but their consequences depend on political networks, institutional arrangements, state capacity, citizenship structures, economic interests, historical grievances, and configurations of power. A relational approach consequently shifts the analytical question from whether religion causes a particular outcome to how religious meanings become connected to actors, institutions, resources, media, and structures in ways that make particular outcomes possible. Religion, from this perspective, is neither a self-contained variable nor a residual cultural category; it is a historically situated, relational, and mediated phenomenon.

This perspective also opens a wider research agenda. Future studies of public religion would benefit from more comparative, multi-sited, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary designs that trace how religious meanings move across institutions, generations, locations, and media environments. Such research should attend more systematically to minority voices, gender, generational differences, internal religious diversity, dissent, migration, transnational networks, political economy, and the roles of actors who do not identify primarily through religion but nevertheless participate in shaping religious publics. Digital mediation deserves particular attention. The cases in this issue demonstrate how festivals, *pesantren*, courts, political institutions, ritual traditions, narratives, and architecture mediate the public presence of religion; contemporary religious publics increasingly develop alongside platforms, search systems, recommendation algorithms, networked audiences, and AI-generated religious information. These infrastructures raise a further generation of questions: How do platforms reorganize religious visibility? How do algorithms affect which religious voices become discoverable and authoritative? How do networked publics transform collective memory and belonging? How does AI reshape access to religious knowledge and the boundaries between expertise, mediation, and interpretation? Extending Religious Studies toward these institutional, material, political, and technological environments offers a productive way forward. The enduring question is therefore no longer simply whether religion remains public, but through which relationships, infrastructures, practices, and forms of mediation religion continually becomes public.

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