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Translating Scholarship: Can academics and the media work together?

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Professors and reporters need to find new ways to work together to shape public discourse on religion argues Elayne Oliphant.

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French street art (Photo: AFP)

By **Elayne Oliphant**

This past year was my first as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies at New York University. My degree is in anthropology, but my

interests had long forced me to straddle these disciplines, an experience that was solidified during the two years I spent as a postdoc in the Department of Religious Studies at Brown University. Almost as soon as I received a place on the Religious Studies website at Brown, I began to notice an uptick in a certain type of email. In former positions as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, or as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Knox College and Sweet Briar College (always in Departments of Anthropology), I had received the occasional query from a member of the public who, through a Google search, had encountered my name. Some of these queries were straightforward; others were odd; not all of them did I commit the time to answering. However, as a member of a Religious Studies Department, I was intrigued to note that such queries significantly increased. And, rather than simply requests for my opinion or thoughts on a particular topic, many such emails endeavored to pass on information to me, often in the form of lengthy manuscripts (sometimes several hundred pages long), which the senders implored me to share with my students. Within these pages, the writers declared themselves to have discovered the secrets of the universe, the deep unconscious connections that brought the various religions together, or a new layer of truth about the life and gospel of Jesus. I confess to rarely having given more than a passing glance to such emails. The time commitments of teaching and research are significant, and while I was intrigued that professors of Religious Studies appear more likely to receive such emails (ask around—your friends and colleagues are likely sitting on quite the treasure trove) than those in other disciplines, I otherwise filed the messages away mostly unread.

Requests from the media to comment on current day events have also increased, particularly since I arrived in New York. Often, these emails are frustrating. Journalists tend to demand detailed responses, within hours, to a number of questions that lie far outside of our field of expertise. When Pope Francis came to the United States in September 2015, for example, I received a request to comment upon what effect his visit to prisons in Philadelphia would have on prison reform in the United States. As someone who studies Catholicism and secularism in France, I had little desire to offer my reflections on such a significant topic as prison reform in America, an issue about which I could offer no insights.

There was one query I received this year, however, that I could not ignore. When I received a request for my opinion from the *New York Times*, I must confess, I put aside my typical skepticism and took some delight in the idea of seeing my name quoted as an expert in the paper of record.This query was somewhat closer to my field of study, focused as it was on France. Compared to the horrific stories of violence that have dominated discussions about France in 2015-16, the

story may appear rather banal: Air France had restarted its flights to Tehran and warned its female airline attendants that they would be required to dress according to local laws when in Tehran and cover their heads. The reporter seemed interested less in why Air France would make such a rule and more interested in why its guidelines had caused such an uproar in France. My research focuses on the production of the unseen norms that are mistaken for unmarked universals in France. I argue that such seemingly small controversies accomplish a great deal of the discipline and encouragement required to structure and reproduce a public sphere in which all religions are not treated equally.

Given the importance of the issue, I attempted to distill the various contexts that made the controversy surrounding "Air Burka" (as detractors insisted upon renaming the company) both unsurprising and deeply problematic. I asked the reporter to try to give space to three different issues. First, I demonstrated how, while *laïcité* appears to be a straightforward cultural and political ban on religious signs, it is, in fact, a complex social formation that is applied in flexible and diverse ways in France. I offered up the example of the region of Alsace-Moselle. Because the province was under German control in 1905 when many of the laws related to *laïcité* were formed, these laws never came to be applied here. Instead, the Napoleonic Concordat of 1801, which requires religious education in schools and the region pays the salaries of priests, pastors, and rabbis, applies exceptionally to this region. Second, I pointed out how fraught the conversation around signs of Islam has become in France. I explained that while the word "burqa" is often used, such a piece of clothing is, in fact, non-existent there. What is generally being referred to is the niqab, which itself is a negligible sight at best. At the time of the debates surrounding the ban on full-face veils in 2010-11, security services counted 367 niqabs in France. Finally, I directed the reporter toward an editorial that had been published in the now infamous satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, following the bombing at the airport in Brussels to point to the fact that it is not only extreme voices on the Right making xenophobic arguments. In the piece, the authors insist that there is no difference between a local owner of a boulangerie who refuses to serve ham sandwiches and prays five times a day and the men who strapped themselves with explosives and killed 30 people. Xenophobic positions mark the tenor of debates around Islam on both the Left and Right in France.

After carefully laying out these three issues, I mentioned as an aside that "it is in this context that reasonable suggestions, such as dressing in ways that accord with the local laws of a country, become threatening restrictions upon the 'liberty of conscience'." Looking over my efforts, it dawned on me how much information I had given this reporter and I worried that he might not know how to begin to

incorporate it into his reporting. I sought out the opinion of *The Revealer*'s editor, Kali Handelman. Incorporating her suggestions, I offered a quick conclusion: "*Laïcité* and secularism are not monolithic, even in France. The situation since 2003 is one in which overreactions to inaccurate assumptions about overblown 'threats' have produced further overreactions that, are, in turn, creating a frighteningly inhospitable and hostile environment defended in the name of *laïcité*." I hoped that, even if he couldn't take the time to follow all of the links I had carefully sent him, or read up on the diversity of secularisms in France, he would be able to identify my overarching argument.

I was confident that I had made the right choice in not simply offering a one line blurb, but providing the reporter with a larger context that, while it may not end up in the article itself, would help to inform how he shaped his writing. In response to my page-long email, the reporter offered a quick and polite thank you and then I heard nothing more from him. I assumed that the article had been pushed, or he had decided not to quote me, but the next morning I punched my name and "New York Times" into Google just to make sure. My heart sank when I found the following midway down in an article entitled "Air France Faces Backlash Over Veil Policy on Route to Iran."

Elayne Oliphant, a professor of religious studies at New York University, said larger anxieties over terrorism and the cultural assimilation of France's Muslim minority have led some people see [sic] a threat in "reasonable suggestions, such as dressing in ways that accord with the local laws of a country."

I couldn't deny that the words the reporter had included in quotations were, indeed, words I had written to him. That they were the most insignificant of the words I had written was disappointing. That he attributed such words to the contexts of "larger anxieties over terrorism" and "the cultural assimilation of France's Muslim minority," however, was far more problematic and constituted a gross misreading of my argument. What is more, such a misreading ultimately forced me to publicly state an argument opposite to that which I have carefully concluded over many years of research in France. And while only a handful of people are likely to read the academic articles in which my argument is made, here I was making an argument I abhor in as public a venue as academics could hope for: the *New York Times*.

I took some solace when I distributed the article to members of my undergraduate advanced seminar on secularism. As they read it to themselves I knew when each of them had reached the unfortunate sentence by the sharp intakes of breath and sighs of embarrassment on my behalf. At least I had made my position on secularism clear enough to them over the past six weeks that they

knew I would never make such a claim. One student did a quick search and reassured me that the article had "only been retweeted three times." By one metric of readership, then, I could take comfort in knowing that this piece had not circulated much wider than my last article in an academic journal. I presented the article to my students as a problem I hoped they could help me to address. I distributed the original email I had sent to the reporter and asked them how I could have made myself clearer. I expressed my hesitation at reducing my responses to reporters to tweet-length sound bites. I felt it was my duty as someone who had spent years reading and researching on a particular set of topics to make my fields of expertise available to a broader public. My students looked at me as if I were quaint. In today's media environment, they explained, one needed to control how one was tweeted. In the future, I should offer nothing more than a sentence or two that would protect me from being used to make arguments I despised.

Together we drafted an op-ed reply to the *New York Times*, but at that point it felt too long after the fact to effectively address the problem. Ultimately, the experience ended up feeding into the classroom more than contributing to any changes to the piece. The very kind and thoughtful reporter followed up with me after I wrote my concerns to him and we spoke on the phone for quite some time. Eventually I was able to make him see the difference between what I had written and what he had attributed to me, but he explained that there was really no way to correct the article. Had he mistakenly called me a professor at Columbia University, such an error would have instantly received a retraction. But, as my students had tried to explain to me, there was simply no space for the kind of nuanced correction I desired. And so I was left contributing to the very kinds of assumptions I had hoped to overturn.

When I recount the experience to colleagues, they typically respond with similar tales. Most have become convinced by these experiences that it is best for academics to avoid journalists entirely. No one had a story of a satisfying interaction with the press when it came to translating his or her research into a broader public realm. At best, they suggested – just as my students had – one can offer a sentence or two that leave no room for misinterpretation. I was deeply dissatisfied with this advice, but have little doubt that I will hesitate the next time I am approached by a reporter. Are there alternatives to this unfortunate conclusion? How can academics and journalists more effectively converse with one another? A quick glance at *The Revealer* and its round-ups of interesting writings on religion demonstrate that a great deal of progress has been made. Far more interesting claims and questions about religion are posed in non-academic writing than one was likely to find fifteen or twenty years ago. But such positions tend to be relegated to specialty publications, further exacerbating our

segregated reading habits. And there is still good reason to worry about the dangers of simplistic accounts of religion that we can find in the daily presses. In a year in which France has suffered terrifying violence, it has been devastating to see such a complex context reduced to "Islamic extremism" in ways that help to buttress the most frightening of xenophobic voices. At such a time, it feels all the more irresponsible for me to throw up my hands and declare that there is nothing I can do to alter the situation because I fear more for my reputation than the tenor of the debate. My students were quick to blame the reporter for the misinterpretation. And while he certainly plays a role, my guess is that he knew that the *New York Times* expected a certain type of argument from his article. He merely had to implement it. One of the ways in which the arguments implicit in *New York Times* articles are validated, of course, is through a quick sentence or two from a professor associated with a respected university. Thus, I not only fretted that the misattribution would tarnish my reputation as a scholar. I also resented being used to validate an argument I hoped to dismantle.

This experience also forced me to reflect more on those manuscripts sent to professors of Religious Studies around the country. It is, in many ways, exciting that our discipline attracts such engagement. And yet, armchair philosophers seem to imagine that we study, research, and teach an object very different to the one we understand ourselves to be encountering. Where they see a single mystery to be unraveled, we explore the nuances, contradictions, and creative social and cultural expressions of often highly local religious experiences. And I think this also might be the crux of our challenges of engaging with the press. Public discourse about religion presumes to already know what it is; scholarly opinions are sought, not to nuance or expand understanding, but to confirm assumptions already circulating. And so, can scholars most effectively challenge this status quo by mastering the art of the tweet? Of the two-sentence sound bite that necessarily limits the kinds of discourses our expert opinions authorize? As a graduate student, I once joked that in order for our research and efforts not to go to waste, we should be required not only to produce a dissertation, but a Wikipedia page on our topic. If I had been able to refer the reporter to my Wikipedia page, would it have been easier for him to translate my argument into the paper of record? I continue to hesitate. After a summer of Trump and the burkini, however, figuring out how to translate our arguments into the broader public sphere has never felt more pressing.

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***Elayne Oliphant**'s scholarship explores the privilege of Christianity in France and Europe. She rethinks the evolutionary tale of religious to secular by examining the ongoing (and ever-transforming) dominance of Christian signs and symbols in*

the public sphere. She has published essays exploring the privileged circulation of Christian signs in contemporary art exhibits, museum displays, and European Court of Human Rights rulings. She is currently completing her first book entitled Signs of an Unmarked Faith: Contemporary Art and Secular Catholicism in 21st Century Paris. *Her current research projects include: an examination of the significant role played by real estate, insurance, and financial industries in maintaining the power and privilege of Christian heritage spaces throughout France; and a study of the effects of the closure of nine Catholic churches in Manhattan, both on the cityscape and for the city's Catholic population.*

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