



# Culture and Religion

## An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcar20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcar20)

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To cite this article: Martijn Oosterbaan & Tessa Diphooorn (2023) From religious police to religious policing, Culture and Religion, 23:3, 225-239, DOI: [10.1080/14755610.2024.2377875](https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2024.2377875)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2024.2377875>



Published online: 02 Aug 2024.



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## From religious police to religious policing

### Introduction

News agencies are increasingly reporting on the actions of so-called religious police forces. In such accounts, the term ‘religious police’ is commonly employed to denote security actors that enforce religious norms by, for example, going around neighbourhoods to correct perceived immoral behaviour. In September 2022, for example, riots broke out in Iran when a 22-year-old Iranian woman died after being beaten by the state’s Islamic police, also known as *Gasht-e-Ershad* (Guidance Patrols). Another notable example is the Saudi Arabian police force *Mutawa*, consisting of Sunni men who patrol the streets to regulate gender roles and relations. *Mutawa* men are often formally ‘employed in an organic manner after having risen up as self-professed vigilantes in their local mosques’ (Strobl 2016, 555).<sup>1</sup> These two examples support the geographical claim made by the Pew Research Center, which compiled a report in 2014 that stated that although ‘religious police’ are counted in nearly one in ten countries worldwide, they are predominantly in North-African and Middle Eastern countries, and presumably absent from Europe and the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of religious police, often associated with theocratic governance, has been granted ample attention, yet is it by far not the only fusion between policing and religion that we are currently witnessing around the globe. Across different localities we observe varying ways in which policing and religion are intertwined. During her ethnographic fieldwork in both Kenya and South Africa, Tessa Diphoorn observed how both state police officers and private security officers would come together to form a circle and engage in a prayer together. Such prayers largely centred around asking for God’s blessing and protection during the potential dangers they could encounter during their shifts. In Northern India, Hindu nationalist vigilantes cooperate closely with the local police to incriminate Muslim men who supposedly seduce and marry Hindu women as a means to increase the number of Islamic converts – a practice that Hindu nationalists refer to as ‘love jihad’.<sup>3</sup>

Turning our attention to Europe, and thereby defying the geographical distinction in the Pew Research Centre report, leads us to the vigilante group ‘Soldiers of Odin’, which rapidly spread from Finland to European and American countries (Castle and Parsons 2019). This transnational group employs images and narratives from pre-Christian European mythology to

frame their anti-immigrant ideology that stands at the heart of their neighbourhood watch practices that supposedly aid the police with crime prevention.

In their work on Parisian urban life, Claire Hancock and Virginie Mobillion (2019) show that veiled women are labelled as 'victims' of oppressive Islam in public discourse, but that they frequently feel unsafe and experience harassment when they move through the upper-class *arrondissements* of the city. Their wish to be shielded by state-institutions against every-day discrimination and pestering is commonly disregarded, amongst others because the secularist public discourse generally depicts non-veiled women (and not them) as the likely victims of urban harassments. Meanwhile, Islamic garbs, such as the *burqa* and the *niqab*, are frequently described as potential security threats (Cohen-Almagor 2022), and the 2010 French ban of the *burqa* was juridically possible because legislators agreed it could be conceived as a threat to the 'immaterial public order' (Fredette 2015).

These cases, along with the contributions of this Issue, raise a host of questions about the role of religion in everyday policing across the globe. They point to the need to re-evaluate common assumptions, taken-for-granted notions, and even (geographical) prejudices about everyday policing and the role and place of religion therein. For example, religious security practices are not solely aimed at the enforcement of religious doctrines but are also part of the desired reproduction of police authority and are regularly used to receive divine protection during risky endeavours or to receive spiritual aid during police missions. Furthermore, religious practices are not only confined to non-state policing entities, as some scholars may allude (Baker 2008). Rather, religious practices are also employed by the state police, even in societies that are constitutionally secular and where it is assumed and expected that the state police are non-religious.

In this special issue, we introduce the framework of 'religious policing' to encapsulate the diverse ways in which policing entities are entangled with religious practices. We want to demonstrate the analytical significance of comprehending the myriad of relationships between religious practices in policing, and how a focus on religion can develop our understanding of how policing is enacted, experienced, and interpreted. In their attempt for a revival of the intersection between religion and policing, McFayden and Prideaux (2014, 603) state that: 'Just as religion is absent as a unifying theme or analytical category in policing studies and criminology, so has policing been ignored in academic study of religion'. Although the authors highlight the notable exception of studies that have examined terrorist organisations, such as Al Qaeda and the impact of counterterrorist policing strategies on communities, the reality is that there is insufficient scholarly attention on the diverse ways in which religion and policing merge.

This special issue aims to fill this gap. Our first way of doing so is by specifically focusing on policing, rather than ‘the police’. This pluralised approach to policing allows us to centralise security practices that move beyond dichotomies of state versus non-state, illegal versus legal, formal versus informal. Second, we approach religion as ‘lived’ (McGuire 2008) and as a set of ideas practices that connect people to a ‘non-empirical sphere – a beyond – which can only be rendered tangible through mediation’ (Meyer 2020, 6). This perspective allows us to go beyond dichotomies of sacred versus profane and religious versus secular.

With the framework of religious policing, we aim to broaden the scope in which we can understand how notions, symbols, and ideas of religion often define policing practices, and in turn, how understandings and practices of policing shape the ways in which lived understandings religion are experienced and defined. By means of ethnographic material, we aim to demonstrate that religious security performances are processual and often the result of complex imbrications between formal and informal actors. Before turning to our framework and the diverse cases that make up this special issue, we first reflect on some of the existing (anthropological) scholarship on policing and religion.

### **Plural policing and fragmented sovereignty**

Effective policing of the public domain is arguably one of the primary expectations that residents have of the(ir) state and state sovereignty has often been defined in terms of the state’s monopoly on the use of force, with the police as the quintessential executive actor. Yet in many societies across the globe, sovereignty is fragmented (Davis 2009; Gazit 2009; Lund 2013), outsourced (Buur 2005), contested (Buur and Maria Kyed 2006; Sieder 2011), and disputed (Kyed 2019; Pansters 2015). Rather than starting from the assumption that the state is the only or principal sovereign actor, it is thus better to describe securityscapes as a ‘horizontally woven tapestr[ies] of partial sovereignties’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, 35). Taking this pluralised approach to sovereignty, we also draw from insightful work on the anthropology of security (see Diphooorn and Grassiani 2019; Ghertner and McFann 2020; Glück and Low 2017; Goldstein 2010; Holbraad and Pedersen 2013) and approach policing in a pluralised sense. This entails that we contend that the state police is not the sole institution that is engaged in policing, but that policing is ‘a social process that is executed by a range of actors in order to maintain a particular social order’ (Diphooorn 2016, 13). We can thus identify complex security assemblages (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009) and security regimes (Al-Bulushi, Ghosh, and Grewal 2023) across the globe that include various actors, objects, and practices, and an array of relationships between them, ranging from

competition to collaboration (see Albrecht and Kyed 2015; Andersen, Møller, and Stepputat 2007; Colona and Diphooorn 2017; Diphooorn 2016; Diphooorn and Grassiani 2019; Durão, Robb Larkins, and Argentin 2024; Goldstein 2010; Higate and Utas 2017; Tapscott 2023; Waseem 2021; Wilson and Bakker 2016). Numerous scholars have tried to grasp this complexity and what this means for authority and power through an array of concepts, such as hybridity (Colona and Jaffe 2016; Jaffe 2013), twilight (Diphooorn 2016; Lund 2006), and simultaneity (Albrecht and Moe 2015).

Yet within this increasing focus on plural policing, much less attention has been given to the role of religion. This is peculiar, given the prominence that religious symbols, ideologies, materials, and practices have at the heart of such organisations (Baylouny 2010; Benda-Beckmann et al. 2013; Chido 2016; Kirsch and Turner 2009; Salem 2024; Turner and Schlee 2017). One exception is the contribution by McFayden and Prideaux (2014), who explore the role of religion in policing and in policing studies. The authors stress the merit of analysing the intersection of religion and policing and 'invite further multi-disciplinary study of this under researched area, which might draw policing studies into engagement with theology and religious studies' (603). We accept their invitation and aim to develop and push the agenda further on several analytical points.

The first is to problematise the tendency to associate religious policing with non-state policing. This is explicitly done so by policing scholar Bruce Baker (2008, 84–86), who identifies the religious police as an actor within his typology of policing groups on the African continent. For him:

Religious police have much in common with informal organized security groups. They are community-based, and use censure and beating to enforce their order with little regard for the state law. Also, despite their rhetoric, they have minimal co-operation with the police. Where they differ is that they are organized typically by community religious leaders and exercise surveillance as well as responsible roles. (Baker 2008, 84)

Baker then refers to Shari'a law in various Nigerian states as his primary example. According to Baker, the state police in Nigeria are unable and unwilling to enforce Shari'a Penal Codes and as a result, security groups called *hisba*, have taken on this role, often through support from the state. This idea of being unable and unwilling to enforce Shari'a Penal Codes reaffirms an understanding of the state as incapable or failing, while numerous studies have highlighted how the existence and growth of non-state policing can also be the result of direct state outsourcing and/or informal networks and collaborative efforts (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009; Albrecht and Kyed 2015; Diphooorn 2016). Religious policing is thus erroneously associated with non-state policing that emerges because of state failure.

We aim to debunk these assumptions and subsequent depiction of the state police as a religiously neutral actor. The latter, i.e. seeing the state police as inherently a-religious, stems from a secular perspective of the state police. This is also identified by McFadyen and Prideaux, who state that the absence of religion as phenomenon for analysis: 'reflects the way in which criminology understands itself and the phenomena it studies as secular – and how, in that, secularity is understood in a way that excludes religion from notice or assumes its irrelevance to the community of practice engaged in policing or to those receiving a policing service' (McFayden and Prideaux 2014, 605). Another key reading is Fisher and Leonardi's (2021) analysis of spiritual insecurity, wherein they argue that scholarly representations of states as rationally driven, secular organisations should be regarded as myths. Yet, despite this critique, they generally continue to portray state actors as exponents of the state's rational-judicial character and describe how rational-judicial principles regularly clash with the experiences of people on the ground. Existing scholarship thus tends to associate religious policing practices with non-state actors and confirm secularist tendencies, both of which we want to problematise.

### **Police as secular sacred?**

Since the foundational publication of Michael Banton's (1964) sociological work on the police, many authors have highlighted the 'sacred' quality of the police (Manning 2008, 2012; Murji 2009; Reiner 1995, 2015). Building on the work of Durkheim ([1912] 2001), amongst others, these authors in lesser or greater degree acknowledge the sacred character of the police as an institution that is 'set apart' as something that is both awesome and dangerous and which symbolises governmental order. Nevertheless, the authors generally presume that the sacred character of the police is not to be defined as 'religious' and that actual religious traditions do not play a part in the reproduction of this sacredness. Writing about Anglo-American societies, renowned police studies scholar Peter K. Manning (2012, 190), for instance, states: 'The police thus play a role in the dramas that display the *secularised* religion of a civil society' (Bellah et al. 2007; emphasis ours).

We question the universal description of police performances as *secular* sacred. In his seminal text 'Civil Religion in America' (Bellah 1967), Robert Bellah analyzes the public functioning of religious references and symbols that do not strictly belong to a particular religion and argues that such references and symbols 'have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere' (Bellah 1967, 3–4). Bellah sees civil religion as a collection of religio-political practices and representations that can exist alongside religious traditions and institutions in the

narrow sense, and, more importantly, he does not describe it as secularised religion. In his original text, Bellah writes: 'The American civil religion was never anticlerical or militantly secular. On the contrary, it borrowed selectively from the religious tradition in such a way that the average American saw no conflict between the two' (Bellah 1967, 13).

The point of this small detour is not to deny the possible sacralisation of the police but to question the necessary *secular* sacredness of police forces. Zooming in on Ireland, for example – one of the countries that Manning refers to – Vicky Conway (2013) demonstrates the close historical ties between the Catholic Church and the Irish National Police (*Garda Síochána*): 'As has been stated a number of times in this book, political influences have repeatedly over-ridden objective policing in Ireland and for many decades religion and politics were inseparable' (Conway 2013, 172). In this case, and arguably many others, a rigid conceptual boundary between religion and civil religion seems untenable. While the term 'civil religion' helps to remind us that nation-states may produce civil religion, the term can also obfuscate instances when particular religious traditions and/or institutions become firmly entangled with the nation-state. Such amalgamations are generally better described by concepts such as 'confessional states' (Casanova 2008) or as 'religious nationalism' (Van der Veer 1994).

José Casanova and Peter van der Veer stood at the forefront of sociological and anthropological debates regarding the relation between modern states and religion and have urged to unravel normative and analytic approaches to religion in relation to governmental power (see also Asad 1993, 2003; Berger 1996; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011; Cannell 2010; Casanova 1994; Connolly 2011; Martin 1991; Scott and Hirschkind 2006). Broadly speaking, these authors have demonstrated the errors of political theory that describe modern state-formation in terms of the necessary privatisation of religious practices and ideologies, and the multitude of ways in which secular constitutions can go hand in hand with public religion. Whereas many democracies are considered secular, in the sense that they regulate by law what is considered religion and prescribe how it should be distinguished from commerce and politics (amongst others), in many cases, religious institutions, symbols and ideologies are firmly embedded in social and political life and inform notions of belonging, political community, moral conduct, *etcetera*. This is clearly evident in this Issue's piece by Nir Gazit and Erella Grassiani and their analysis of the Israeli organisation *HaShomer HaChadash* (The New Guard) and its attempts to fill a gap of security in Israel's periphery that, in the organisation's words, falls prey to 'agricultural terrorism', such as theft and arson. The authors show how the activities of this organisation are a renaissance of Israeli civil religion by the convergence of both civil-religious and religious principals with neo-national themes and values. The activities of the organisation and neo-Zionist ideology exemplify

the role of religion and tradition by giving security a new meaning by locating it in civil society in ways that transcend and challenge statist frameworks of security and affiliation.

In this special issue, we treat the secular as a governmental category that informs understandings of what religion is. We are inspired by Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr (2013) approach, who contend that it is best to focus on the 'shifting symbolic meanings that the secular acquires within historically specific relations of political power and epistemic authority and the ways in which religious-secular dynamics are interpreted in the light that culturally resonant visions of modernity throw on it' (606–607). Consequently, it is pertinent to unpack the culturally specific assessments of the relation between religion and policing forces in different societies around the world.

In this collection, we want to add that state security actors also regularly take on board notions of religious security and not just *in response* to lived religion on the ground, but also as result of entanglements between religio-moral ideologies and the state. This is explicitly visible in the contribution by Carly Machado and Martijn Oosterbaan, who portray how the practices and representations of a specific state police unit in Brazil, namely BOPE, display political theological continuities and transformations. Whereas historically Roman Catholicism provided the privileged language and practices of Brazilian political theologies, Born-again Christianity – with all its varieties and manifestations – has become a very important element of BOPE's religious manifestations. Similarly, in her article of this issue, Francesca Cerbini focuses on the growing presence of the Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD)* within a Portuguese state prison. She shows how this religious organisation managed to entangle itself with a penitentiary institution oriented by neoliberal deregulation. Both contributions thus highlight how various enactments of religious experiences are fused within state governance and security performances.

### **New framework: religious policing**

Our understanding of religious policing thus aims to include the complex and diverging ways in which religious and policing are interconnected for state and non-state policing actors, and everything in-between. In this sense, the term 'religious' in 'religious policing' is not an adjective to describe a certain type of policing or create a particular 'category' of policing that focuses on, for example, the surveillance of certain moral codes or the implementation of certain religious doctrines. Rather, the framework of 'religious policing' aims to capture the dialectical conversations between the two terms – how they feed into each other; what does the religious say about policing and what does policing say about our interpretation and understanding of religion. Religious policing thus acts as a new conceptual framework to further

understand the intersections between religion and security, and the various contributions to this special issue draw on extensive ethnographic fieldwork to demonstrate how this occurs across diverse regions and by multiple actors. Combined, by introducing the framework of religious policing, we aim to contribute to existing scholarly work in four main ways.

The first is our pluralised approach to policing and understanding how religious practices are performed by a variety of policing scholars. We are interested in understanding how different types of actors often engage in a purposeful encouragement/encroachment of religious ideas for order-making. In numerous cases across the globe, police forces frequently operate hand in hand with religious authorities to emphasise the legitimacy of their actions and vigilantes and watch-groups regularly act in the name of a religious tradition or present religious norms and practices to bolster their authority (cf. Omeje 2005). Moreover, bottom-up security actors and state institutions regularly become entangled with one-another, complicating neat distinctions between the formal and the informal. And, to make matters more complex, these hybrid actors can involve both formal religious institutions *and* bottom-up religious innovations.

Our second contribution is an explicit focus on the materiality of religious policing, which draws from the ‘material turn’ in both religious studies (see Meyer and Houtman 2012; Vásquez 2011) and security studies (see Aradau 2010; Colona 2020; Diphooorn 2020; Ivasiuc 2023; Walters 2014). Throughout the various contributions, we analyse the use and appearance of religious symbols, ideologies, materials, and practices at the margins of the state to analyse how authority is reproduced by certain security actors. This includes, for example, how a specific state police unit in Brazil employ religious iconography to exert authority, and the ways in which Pentecostal pastors provide ‘protection’ in South Africa. Recently, Fisher and Leonardi (2021) have argued that in the global search for security, too much attention is placed on the tangible and visible. Taking a vernacular security approach (Bubandt 2005), they argue for more attention for ‘spiritual (in)security’ (Ashforth 1998, 2010) as people in many parts of the world experience insecurity as caused by transcendental forces. We side with their plea to emphasise that in the eyes of many, daily risks and spiritual insecurity are closely associated with each another. And it is precisely for this reason that religious specialists are regularly framed as security actors (see also Burchardt 2017).

Fisher and Leonardi (2021) hasten to add that physical phenomena are part of the spiritual experiences, and we should therefore not disregard the materiality of spiritual security: ‘Spiritual (in)security can perhaps best be differentiated from other forms of (in)security with regard to materiality in that the ultimate source of comfort or fear derives its perceived power from the transcendental and metaphysical – something invisible to at least the majority of humankind’ (Fisher and Leonardi 2021, 388).

Such an understanding of spirituality accords with what is commonly called the ‘material turn’ in religious studies (Meyer and Houtman 2012; Vázquez 2011), which comprises a collective endeavour to take ‘things’ as indispensable elements in making the transcendental present. This dimension clearly comes to the fore in Murtala Ibrahim’s contribution to this Issue that explores how the Yoruba traditional religion, using protective charms, plays a crucial role in reaffirming and consolidating vigilantes’ legitimacy and authority. By explicitly drawing from the material turn in religious studies, he shows how the use of charms is inextricably interlinked with the traditional religion through a relational network established through the ritual of oath-taking. As a result, deities of traditional religion become active participants in the local security governance of the vigilantes.

Our third contribution entails a broader approach to understanding religion in policing by moving beyond strict conceptualisations of policing. For many anthropologists working on policing, it is often associated with order making, and especially, with the creation of a moral and social order (see Diphooorn 2016; Fassin 2013; Karpik and Garriott 2018; Larkins 2023). Many of the contributions to this issue analyse how religious notions and practices are a part of this order making. However, there are also other ways in which religion and policing merge. One dominant way is how religious leaders are increasingly incorporated within community policing programmes around the globe. Community policing is an umbrella term used to refer to specific policing styles, units, approaches, and programmes that broadly aim to enhance relationships between citizens and policing bodies and include communities within policing (see Brogden and Nijhar 2005). Although numerous studies have outlined the predicaments of defining the community (see Diphooorn and van Stapele 2021), religious leaders are habitually defined as important stakeholders due to their authority and respected roles within communities. As such, religious leaders become incorporated within policing assemblages, as also outlined by McFayden and Prideaux (2014). Baker (2008), for example, also recognises the role that faith-based organisations play in dealing with justice complaints (which he then places under the category of ‘restorative justice committees’). Although these are not surveillance practices, they are crucial to shaping how security is experienced and defined in communities.

Although McFayden and Prideaux (2014) state that so-called faith communities do not appear to do any policing themselves, we have identified a more fluid spectrum in which such communities can take up policing roles, especially in circumstances where states lack the capacity to manage local security single-handedly or where they deliberately outsource security tasks to informal actors. This can clearly be seen in Marian Burchardt’s article in this Issue, who explores the multiple links between Pentecostalism and the production of security in

Cape Town's isiXhosa-speaking townships and traces the ways in which Pentecostal churches have become embroiled with Cape Town's criminal economies, illegality, and violence. Burchardt shows how Pentecostal pastors compete with other spiritual specialists that lay claims on spiritual protection just as with the state's law enforcement agencies over the meanings of crime and violence and legitimate ways to counter them.

Our fourth point is a more disciplinary one. In their plea for more engagement with the intersection of religion and policing, McFayden and Prideaux (2014) outline the merit of a cross-disciplinary perspective, including criminology and religious studies, and we wholeheartedly accept this. Yet we also advocate for more (more) ethnographic research to better unpack the dialectic between religion and policing. This not only allows us to better understand the meaning ascribed to policing practices and the 'everyday' of policing (Sausdal 2021), but an ethnographic approach provides further opportunities for comparative analysis on how religion and policing intersect in diverse ways. For example, McFadyen and Prideaux base their reflections on policing in the UK and do not question some of the assumptions that need to be tackled to analyse the relations between religion and policing in a global, comparative perspective. Such global comparisons should, according to us, also include more ethnographic research on policing practices in so-called Western societies that identify themselves as secular yet harbour state-institutions that reproduce hegemonic and questionable understandings of 'harmless' religious subjects vis-à-vis religious subjects prone to 'radicalization' (Fadil, Ragazzi, and de Koning 2019).

This special issue explicitly draws from case-studies from across the globe, such as Brazil, Israel, Nigeria, Portugal, and South Africa, to uncover both the similarities and differences in the ways that religion and policing intersect. As an encompassing framework, religious policing thus aims to understand diverse cases from across the globe and thereby emphasise the analytical merit of further analysing the dialectic between religious experiences and policing practices.

## Notes

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36034807>.
2. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/03/19/religious-police-found-in-nearly-one-in-ten-countries-worldwide/>.
3. <https://theintercept.com/2021/07/03/love-jihad-law-india/>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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