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Advocacy in the study of religion\

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ABSTRACT This article introduces a thematic issue on advocacy in the study of religion\'. It reflects on some issues relating to instances of advocacy in the study of religion\'s such as the importance of personal relationships, intervention on behalf of marginal and controversial religions, forms of and audiences for advocacy, its legitimation, and its relations to scholarly identity and the academy.

KEY WORDS: advocacy; activist research; interventionist research; human rights; controversial religions

The dominant modes of legitimate academic activities in the study of religion\'s comprise analysis, comparison, critique, description, explanation, interpretation, and observation. The correlating attitudes are detachment, empathy (and often sympathy), impartiality or neutrality, and academic rigor. As a discipline, the study of religion\'s seeks to not favor one religion over others, but it is often implicitly, if not explicitly, committed to recognizing the existence and value of religious diversity, plurality, or pluralism. The discipline (as commonly understood in Europe and segments of North American academia) is premised on the insider–outsider distinction¹: as scholars we seem to risk losing our credibility and legitimacy once we step out of the assumed outsider posture; we speak about religion, but we seek to avoid speaking religiously; we are engaged in the academic pursuit of the study of religion\'s, but most of us, in Europe and segments of North America, try to avoid being part of religiously engaged religious studies; we portray ourselves as critics, not curators or custodians; scholarly rigor is taken to require distance.

This thematic issue attends to views on defining and/or practicing the discipline that move beyond this powerful but somewhat simplistic scheme. Advocacy is one common denominator of this tendency. A number of developments have helped to raise doubts about the certainty of our positioning as detached/neutral/objective observers, including (research) ethics-discourses, human-right discourses, calls for the societal relevance of scholarship, feminism, queer theory, (neo-) Marxism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, race theories, and other varieties of emancipatory critical theory.

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¹For critiques see Jensen 2011; Gardiner and Engler 2012.

The consequences of these epistemological, methodological, theoretical, ideological, and political turns have been discussed in related disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. In a letter posted on 17 February 2013, on the official blog of the American Anthropological Association the then-president, president-elect, executive director, and a past-president of this association stated: 'Contrary to some loudly voiced claims, both advocacy and science are (and long have been) at the core of our discipline' (Mullings et al. 2013).² To my knowledge, neither the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) nor any of its member associations has so far made a comparable statement. Even though scholars of religion, at least those working on or with contemporary religious communities, often face the above-mentioned advocacy-related issues in their work, they have rarely been put on the agenda, likely due to fears of transgressing boundaries of academic legitimacy. In this issue of *Religion*, we have invited scholars to step forward and reflect on matters related to advocacy in the study of religion\s.³

Across the disciplines, there is a range of (partly overlapping) terms for types of research that lead scholars to take sides and to move beyond the role of the supposedly detached/neutral observer.⁴ In the study of religion\s, the terms concerned science (Droogers 2010),⁵ engaged research (Cush 2005),⁶ and practical study of religion (Klöcker and Tworuschka 2008)⁷ have been introduced for programs that seek to go beyond the standard model of the study of religion\s. None of them, however, centrally resonates with advocacy.

²There are also critical voices, see for example Hastrup and Elsass (1990, 301) and the responses to their article, which argues 'that advocacy, as such, is incompatible with anthropology as a distinct kind of scholarship.'

³As a result of the peer-review process not all papers that were originally commissioned are published here.

⁴Bailey (2008, 266) mentions, among others, the following: public-interest anthropology; public anthropology; public sociology; participatory-action research; activist anthropology; collaborative-action research; action anthropology; scholar-activist approach; critical anthropology; advocacy anthropology; interpretive ethnography; militant anthropology; institutional ethnography; political anthropology; and public-interest sociology. For social anthropology, Antweiler (1998) attempts a systematization of available approaches to societal relevant anthropology: (1) applied anthropology; (2) practicing anthropology; (3) militant, partisan, action, populist anthropology, anthropological advocacy, moral models; (3) anthropology as cultural critique, critical anthropology; (4) engaged, relevant anthropology. The author seeks to avoid the politicization of anthropology.

⁵As he defines and defends it, if the study of religion\s were to become a 'concerned science,' it would seek to contribute to 'the humane quality of religions and religion in the new century' (Droogers 2010, 236). It would 'help to rehabilitate' (Droogers 2010, 237) the power-play balance. It 'would help to make the world a better place in which to live' (Droogers 2010, 237).

⁶Cush models it on Practical Theology and Engaged Buddhism. She envisions that the study of religion\s 'makes a difference to the poor, oppressed, sufferers in conflict situations and the planet' (Cush 2005). Despite its prominent occurrence in the title, Cush mentions the term only briefly at the end of her essay, without giving any examples. (In other fields the term is used in a variety of ways, sometimes with further qualifications such as politically engaged research.)

⁷Tworuschka, who coined this term, conceives of this as more than the mere application of results stemming from research, but as involving additional descriptive and normative dimensions: the practical study of religion\s is an open, plural, interdisciplinary project aimed at making the world a better, i.e., more humane and peaceful, place by drawing on the competence of scholars of religion. Such competence can be relevant in a variety of fields of practical work including social work, education, medicine, media, sports, and tourism – in short, wherever the knowledge produced by the study of religion\s is potentially relevant for improving the situation.

Advocacy

Advocacy research is conducted to promote the goals and interests of a community or group, 'often as a practical plea on its behalf to one or more external agencies' (Sponsel 2001, 204). The communities or groups in question are typically oppressed and discriminated against such as, in many cases, indigenous peoples, members of minorities, or refugees. Advocacy is often legitimated by an appeal to human rights or related values.

At the same time, the word advocacy is often used in a somewhat looser manner, namely as a defense or support of, preference for or commitment to, some cause, thesis, idea, ideal, worldview, or religion. We can speak of somebody advocating atheism, faith, or specific approaches to the study of a phenomenon, etc. Sometimes, in religious studies literature, advocacy is used to denounce a confessional, 'emic,' or 'insider' mode (see also the discussion in Marquardt and Vásquez 2014): it is treated as a synonym for 'theology' (Rocha and Baumann 2008, 81), treated as the opposite of 'objectivity' (Williams 2008, 161) or as inappropriately bringing one's belief into the classroom and one's research (Reader 2008).

In a broad sense we all are advocates of something or other, if only the importance of the non-confessional study of religion\'. Those of us raised in the humanities branch of the study of religion\ are routinely involved in advocating the relevance of the humanities within academia and for society in order to influence resource-allocation decisions and to gain public recognition for our work. There are specific advocacy groups for the humanities like, in the United States, the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), founded in 1981. Since 2000, the NHA, which describes itself as 'an advocacy coalition dedicated to the advancement of humanities education, research, preservation, and public programs' (www.nhalliance.org/about/index.shtml; accessed 16 January 2014) has held an annual Humanities Advocacy Day in Washington, D.C. The AAR 'has been a member of the National Humanities Alliance since 1983 and a sponsor of its Humanities Advocacy Day since 2001' (www.aarweb.org/about/advocacy; accessed 16 January 2014). In fact, to some extent professional organizations serve as advocacy groups for particular disciplines, but the aspect of advocacy is not commonly emphasized very strongly in the relevant study of religion\ associations. As per its constitution (article 2, e), the IAHR seeks to take 'all appropriate steps to encourage and further the cross-cultural, academic study of religions' (iahr.dk/constitution.php; accessed 16 January 2014). In principle, this could include all types of lobbying activities to influence the public and bureaucracies, but so far the IAHR has mainly engaged in intra-academic activities.

This thematic issue seeks to address advocacy in a more specific sense by referring to activities when scholars of religion\ intentionally intervene in some social field in order to support not only an idea or an ideal – such as religious freedom, equality, pluralism, or human rights – but to benefit, however modestly, a specific religious group or sub-group by directly or indirectly seeking to help them to bring about one or some of their goals.⁸ Typically, in these situations the scholar does not belong to the (sub-) groups on behalf of which she or he practices advocacy.

⁸Based on their theoretical positions, some contributions to this issue propose a broader understanding of the nature of advocacy. The starting point for compiling this issue, however, was the definition given above.

Advocacy in this sense is more than assuming the role of experts, advisors, or 'worldview mediators,' even though the latter role, which may be inherently problematic (Weitzman 2013), can be part of advocacy interventions.

Relationships

The relationships between scholars and members or representatives or religious groups or subgroups may be accidental or central to the emergence of advocacy activities. In the latter case, advocacy activities are a function of these relationships. To illustrate the central importance of relationships in the emergence of advocacy, consider the pieces by Marie Marquardt and Greg Johnson in this issue. At one point in the dialogue with her co-author Marquardt states: 'Relationships have been central to my story' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014). She reminds the reader that the process of data collection becomes 'quite messy' when human beings are the research instruments and when one encounters human beings as the subject of one's research and treats them as 'fully human persons.' Marquardt recalls moments in her scholarly trajectory, 'when the circumstances for production of knowledge become secondary concerns.' She criticizes scholars who 'largely avoid the problem of entering into relationships with people who suffer injustice, of caring about those people, of longing for their lives to be better, and of wanting change in the systems that perpetuate their suffering.' Once she had 'witnessed too much, I crossed over into a new identity' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014).

Frank J. Korom reports on his field visit to Trinidad in 1991, where he studied the *muharram* celebrations among Shi'ite of Indian origins, a sub-minority within the Muslim minority on the island. The *muharram* mourning celebrations were criticized among the majority of Sunni Muslims. Some of Korom's Shi'ite friends tried to capitalize on his presence 'to legitimize their presence, their rights to perform their rites' (Korom 2001, 7). Overcoming his initial reluctance, Korom decided to live up to the expectations of his hosts, so he 'went on the radio and on television news, as well as spoke to local journalists, to defend the local legitimacy of the ritual observances by providing historical validity' (Korom 2001, 7). During a later visit, in 1997, he was once again approached by his friends, who now, however, were found among rivaling parties; both sides wanted him 'to advocate their respective positions' (Korom 2001, 8). In order not to betray any of his friends he decided to remain silent, but in order to show sympathy with those whose position he endorsed, he 'assisted in building one of the large model tombs paraded in the streets and participated in the public processions' (Korom 2001, 8–9). Initially Korom's relationship with his hosts had encouraged him to act as their public advocate. Yet, as the network of his friends extended, he withdrew from this role and stepped into that of a participant in their rituals.

The nature of Johnson's work in Hawai'i centrally depends on the rich relationships he has been able to establish over the years, and he has become very close to some people on a personal and social level. The kinds of advocacy activity he has been doing are a consequence of these relationships and one way of maintaining some sort of reciprocity and relevance of his doings for the people he has been working with. Johnson only gets access to certain types of information because of the long-standing relationship of trust that has been built over the years. Such relationships would probably be difficult if not impossible to sustain if one

were to categorically deny any involvement and assistance to individuals or groups by facilitating their goals, which incidentally happen not to be alien to Johnson's own ethical and political commitments. True to the spirit of the study of religion's and its ideals of methodological and theoretical (but not social) detachments, Johnson sees non-partisan analysis as key to his identity as a scholar. Accordingly, he has so far mainly kept the advocacy aspects of his work 'off the page' (Johnson 2014).

Many scholars who engage in intensive and often longitudinal data collection that relies on the development of relationships depending on mutual respect or trust, even if not friendship, can report on requests of different kinds of assistance posed by their contacts. Scholars working on migrant groups, for example, can assist their contacts in dealings with the state bureaucracy. Advocacy can seem too big a word for this give-and-take relationship of time and effort in terms of small favors, but the threshold of advocacy can easily be crossed when the scholar intervenes on behalf of the group by drawing on his or her academic credentials, for example by writing letters of support for the group or some of its members. If these members are high-ranking representatives of a religious organization, this can amount in practice to intervening on behalf of this organization. Advocacy, however, is not a prerogative of scholars working on contemporary religions. Jorun J. Buckley is a well-known example of a scholar who has relentlessly campaigned internationally for the rights of adherents of the ancient religions she has been studying for several decades, the Mandaeans. Although her own work is that of a traditional historian of religions, when meeting Mandaeans and building relationships with them she came to know about their plights in their traditional homelands (Iraq and Iran). At the same time, she faced such general ignorance on this religious community that she received requests for information. Buckley started a sort of information campaign on the religion, history, and current political situation of the Mandaeans, and she got involved in several asylum cases in different countries, where she intervened on behalf of individual Mandaeans.

Turning to examples of the accidental importance of relationships for the emergence of advocacy activities, a small cadre of scholars of new religious movements (NRMs) has become involved since the 1970s as experts and consultants on behalf of such groups in court cases in several countries. According to James T. Richardson, a leading protagonist of this group of scholars, they got involved mainly for three reasons: '(1) We thought some important values such as freedom to experiment with different lifestyles were at stake; (2) our research on why people join and what happens in the group was directly relevant to specific court cases; and (3) our disciplines and relevant research were being misrepresented' (Richardson 1998, 34). In this context, the relationship between scholars and these groups was accidental. They had studied these groups and got involved mainly because of their expertise, not because of the relationships they entertained with these groups, even though they often entertained such relationships as a result of their research. They may not have endorsed the goals of these groups personally or even liked them, but acted on their behalf due to their expertise and because of some general values and worldviews. Even if scholars primarily step in to advocate for principles, whenever they protest the violation of such principles they thereby also act as advocates for certain groups, which may be controversial (like the Church of Scientology or the Unification Church).

Advocacy for marginal and controversial religions

Scholars have intervened mostly on behalf of new and marginal religions or religious minorities. In this issue, Massimo Introvigne (2014) reviews the intervention of academics in a series of legal cases (first in the United States, then in Europe) in which the concept of 'brainwashing' as a supposed mechanism of covert and deceptive persuasion and mind control was of paramount importance. The starting point for the debates on the validity of this concept, which also involved major American professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the American Sociological Association, concerned the Unification Church. In her article in this thematic issue, Lori Beaman (2014) looks back on her legal engagement in cases concerning polygamy as practiced by some Latter-Day Saints groups. In both contexts, advocacy was made on behalf of religious groups not as a means to support their truth claims but to challenge their treatment by the state. The latter, she found as the case evolved, can also be implicitly premised on religious preconceptions or fears,

often referencing a specifically Christian imaginary about family forms and morality. In the end the court upheld the inclusion of polygamy as a Criminal Code offence, by drawing on a particular, mainstream version of marriage and family (rooted in Christianity), and discounting another. And, of course, in the background of public and policy discussion was the worry that the decriminalization of polygamy would open the door to Muslim polygamous marriage. (Beaman 2014)

Some marginal or controversial religious groups have by different means and to different degrees been actively seeking to attract the attention of scholars in order to gain legitimacy or in order to act as a counterbalance to prejudice or perceived misrepresentations by other actors in the field (Barker 1995, 305; Dawson 1998, 9). Different groups seek to control the resulting process to a different degree; some want to impose their perspectives, while others are happy to contribute in whatever measure requested. The Church of Scientology is an example of an organization that has been eager to seek 'allies' among scholars, many of whom, however, have turned into 'enemies' when their research has yielded criticism or perspectives that did not match its self-perception; as the Church intimidated or threatened scholars they have become increasingly fearful that research on Scientology might 'put them or their institutions in jeopardy' (Cowan 2009, 68). The Church asked scholars if they were willing to 'participate in a variety of protests organized by (and not infrequently on behalf of) Scientology' (Cowan 2009, 69). One issue, where scholars of religion were helpful for the Church, was to authenticate its struggle to be recognized as a 'religion.' Commissioned statements by various scholars of religion that might support such a claim were published by Scientology's Freedom Publishing (see <http://hatewatch.freedommag.org/hatewach/experts/>; accessed 17 January 2013). It is a matter of debate if the question of whether or not Scientology qualifies as a religion is an important research question for the study of religion's, but it might have some ramifications for legal decisions, and it is certainly of relevance for an organization that seeks to defend or establish its status as a religion against its critics. So, even if the scholars who had their views published by Freedom Publishing did not intend to act as advocates for Scientology, their opinions could serve the Church's advocacy purposes in their struggle to count as 'religion.'

The advocacy activities by scholars on behalf of new, marginal, and controversial religions have often been misunderstood by their opponents as a defense of their truth claims. Critics and opponents of these groups, often belonging to what NRM scholars refer to as the 'anti-cult movement,' derided the leading rank of NRM scholars as 'cult apologists,' a term which carried different shades of meaning and implied different forms of disagreements depending on who used it (but which minimally indicated being in the wrong camp). In his article in this issue, Introvigne, one of the scholars whose work has been so termed, looks back on the 'advocacy wars,' which were part of the 'cult wars.' Scholars were active as advocates in both camps, which is quite common in litigation, but the 'cult wars' were characterized by a heightened sense of polarization and acrimony (see Robbins 1998 for a discussion). The two opposing camps showed a relatively clear disciplinary divide: on the one side of the divide, psychologists and psychiatrists operated as protagonists of the 'anti-cult movement' who endorsed the brainwashing theory, with NRM scholars, mostly with a background in sociology or religious studies, were active in the other camp (the 'cult apologists'). 'The two camps faced each other in the courts where they hurled accusations of unfair and partisan advocacy at each other' (Introvigne 2014). The scientific credibility and legitimacy of the brainwashing theory served as a crucial yardstick for partisan versus legitimate advocacy; given the importance of establishing whether the 'brainwashing' theory would be recognized as 'scientific,' even writing the relevant entries in the acknowledged manuals had bearings on advocacy. Likewise opting for terms such as 'cults' versus 'new religious movements' could be part of advocacy discourses on different sides of the divide.

While the brainwashing theory has been widely abandoned as a scientific construct in North America and Europe, it still enjoys some popularity in public discourses, sometimes under different names: e.g., under the heading of 'mental manipulation' or 'abuse of weakness,' it was enshrined in a French law passed in 2001 that served the purpose of prosecuting leaders of suspicious 'cults' or 'sects' (Palmer 2011, 21–22). The theory also still enjoys some occasional credibility in Japan, where the atrocities committed by Aum Shinrikyō in 1995 likewise resulted in a veritable 'cult war.' As pointed out by Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader, the Aum Shinrikyō attacks were 'a turning point in Japanese attitudes to religion and, more specifically, to religious organizations, and raised questions about the very nature, presence, and standing of religions in Japan' (Baffelli and Reader 2012, 7; see also Okuyama 2011). The affair also contributed to harming the reputation of the study of religion as an academic discipline in Japan insofar as the discipline had seemed unaware of 'what was going on in Aum, and was ill-prepared to respond to mass media demands for immediate explanations of the affair' (Baffelli and Reader 2012, 17). Shimada Hiromi, a Japanese scholar of Aum who had published sympathetic accounts of the group has been the focus of the debate: he established relatively close ties to Aum and had let himself be deceived by members about their criminal intentions and weapon laboratory (whose existence he publicly denied). He was perceived to be an advocate or accomplice of Aum, even though this may not have been his intention. As a result of the affair, in 1995 he lost his job as full professor of religion at one of Japan's oldest private women's universities (see Reader 2000, 370–371). Moreover, at Aum's invitation and expense, two American NRM scholars (neither of whom were a specialist of Japanese religions) together with a scientist and a human-rights lawyer arrived in Japan the

month after the attacks. Aum sought to enlist their advocacy in a time of serious repercussions and the scholars apparently became convinced that they could and should speak out on behalf of a group that at that time still officially pleaded innocent. However, according to Ian Reader (2000, 372), their intervention turned out to be based on misjudgments both of Aum and the political context so that their visit 'had the unfortunate effect of simply reinforcing the public view that scholars of religion were naïve support teams for dangerous religious groups.'

Advocacy and identity

For most scholars who engage in advocacy, these activities run alongside their academic work. These activities can be highly valuable for them on a personal level, as a platform to further develop their research or as a part of their academic ethos. Yet, in her contribution to this thematic issue, Mary Jo Neitz (2014) points to feminist researchers for whom advocacy 'is often a part of their identity; it is not only what they do, it is who they are.' It is not something that is done after the real work is finished. Being engaged in advocacy holds the potential for changing one's self-perception and identity as a scholar and a human being. In this issue, Marquardt reports how she found it increasingly difficult to distinguish 'between going to parties, baptisms, and *quinceañeras* as a scholar of religion and going as a friend.' She speaks of her 'unique position within and between identities' and asks: 'When I advocate, am I doing it as a Catholic, a religious person, a citizen, or a human being sensitive to suffering, or as a scholar? What's my primary community of interpretation? I would answer all of the above' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014). Her co-author, Manuel Vásquez, recounts that growing up in El Salvador under a repressive military regime made the idea of a value-neutral detached social science seem impossible, and that choosing the study of 'sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and theology was considered a political act, an act that the state regarded as dangerously subversive, since it involved critical reflection: knowledge was sought not purely for its own sake but 'as advocacy of social change.' Decades later, as an immigrant scholar of transnational migration and religious networks in the United States, it was his personal experience with immigrants he met when doing research in a climate of political hostility that convinced Vásquez that analysis alone was no longer sufficient. His experience with threats and discursive exclusion left him with 'no choice but to advocate for immigration reform as an element in the strengthening of the fabric of civil society' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014), but contrary to Marquardt he did not engage in advocacy activities with a specific community or project.

Legitimation

Human rights and related values or aims such as access to justice or the desire to contribute toward 'human flourishing' or to 'creating a more just and humane society' (Marquardt in Marquardt and Vásquez 2014) offer anchorage for advocacy activities for some scholars. Others do not share this grounding, for example because of human rights' enshrinement of a Eurocentric or Enlightenment-centric legacy (see Johnson 2014, who feels compelled to engage in advocacy because he finds the violation of the integrity of Hawaiian burials 'egregious' even without reference to human rights discourses). In her article, Lori Beaman (2014) seeks to move beyond a purely legal understanding of equality when she speaks of 'deep

equality' by referring to those often overlooked everyday interactions such as 'cooperation, agonistic respect, generosity, negotiation, forgiveness, contaminated diversity, imminence, similarity, humour, discomfort, neighbourliness and love.' Advocating such a framework for justice no longer counts as advocacy in the stricter sense as defined above. Similarly, Vásquez provides a broader understanding of advocacy: 'For me, advocacy involves positioning yourself vis-à-vis salient problems in your community, that is, taking a critical stance in response to an urgent problem in the social, historical, cultural, and environmental context in which one is embedded' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014).

Whereas striving for objectivity was evoked as a main virtue and motivation for advocacy by NRM scholars, in this issue Neitz and Marquardt and Vásquez move in the opposite direction by emphasizing standpoint and positionality respectively. Feminist Standpoint epistemology provided a basis and legitimation for advocacy (Neitz 2014). Beaman adopts the

position that every piece of research, in all science, carries with it the potential for advocacy. This means that each researcher has a standpoint and a worldview that is imbricated in the research she carries out. That standpoint becomes advocacy ... when the researcher's self-reflexive engagement with her research moves her to transform her research into action. (Beaman 2014)

From this theoretical perspective advocacy has to proceed from the standpoint of the disadvantaged; research must not result in the further subjugation of the researched (Neitz 2014).

Giving voice to the research subjects, telling stories of abuse and cultures of violence, 'letting people tell their own stories of struggle can be seen as a form of advocacy' (Neitz 2014). As Beaman (2014) points out with regard to her work on Latter-Day Saint women living in polygamous marriages, this strategy was not well received by all feminists, since taking the voices of these people seriously undermined some basic assumptions shared by feminists. For Vásquez it was the critical theoretical line of thinking from Nietzsche to Foucault that convinced him that

we must finally abandon the illusion of disinterestedness ... Because our work is the product of practices of our incarnate being-in-the-world, which is always intentional (a being-toward) and relational (being-with-and-among other beings, from other humans to animals, plants, things, and landscapes, with whom we co-build shared but contested life-worlds), even the claim that a particular discipline has the ability and privilege to bracket certain interests, not to render certain judgments, or not to engage in certain forms of advocacy is itself an act of advocacy. (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014)

It still requires a further step to get involved in practical advocacy activities, but their theoretical repositioning, with its critique of anti-advocacy-advocacy, provides basis for making such a choice not come across as a matter of entering into prohibited territory but as a different mode of the same academic register. Critical analysis amounts to advocacy in a more basic sense as it already amounts to a transformational potentiality or necessity.

Forms and audiences

Johnson's article lists a wide spectrum of advocacy-related activities. Some are highly visible performances, others are 'off stage actions that are often quite

mundane' (Johnson 2014). He also proposes to distinguish between 'explicit and direct advocacy' from 'what might be called circumstantial or situational advocacy' (Johnson 2014).

The legal sphere is one of the most visible arenas of advocacy. Main activities are testifying as an expert or filing an *amicus curiae* brief. Beaman also reports on her work as a lawyer, which brought her in contact with female clients; this work stimulated her developing a feminist identity and her commitment to advocacy. While she did not then do advocacy for specific religious groups, she noted how her 'preconceived notions of religions were shattered through my experiences with my clients' (Beaman 2014). For scholars without legal training, successful advocacy work can in certain cases, for example those relating to asylum issues, depend on good communication and effective cooperation with lawyers.

Other arenas of and audiences for advocacy include the general public, which one hopes to reach by public speaking, media appearances, or specific campaigns. Often, one of the main aims is to supply more or better information and perspectives on little-known, misrepresented, or controversial religion. Fruitful cooperation with journalists is crucial here. Other forms and targets of advocacy include meeting with policy-makers or bureaucrats. Community-based research finds the community itself to be the main audience. Sometimes scholars serve as consultants for groups, which can spill over into or be based on advocacy commitments. Sometimes religious organizations such as churches are also the targets of advocacy activities.⁹

Advocacy, the academy, and religion

Given an understanding of our scholarly work as outlined at the beginning of this introductory article, it is no surprise that relatively few colleagues seem to be engaged in advocacy activities. As Beaman points out, the role of advocacy continues to be devaluated within the academy (not only in the study of religion\ s). 'Advocacy is often not viewed as a valuable contribution to intellectual life, despite an increasing pressure to inform policy decisions and to produce deliverables beyond traditional academic publication' (Beaman 2014).

Scholars writing in this issue emphasize that advocacy can not only be personally fulfilling (even though there is a high personal price to be paid in terms of energy and time) but also yields important insights for their work as a scholars. Beaman speaks of 'a dialectical relationship between the aspects of my work that involve activities that are not strictly 'academic' and those that are more firmly located in traditional academic activities such as publishing and conference presentations' (Beaman 2014). Vásquez concludes by saying that 'scholarship and advocacy are intertwined and can benefit from each other if conducted with a vigilant attitude and an emancipatory interest focused on the intractable problems and defining

⁹In turn, there is a myriad of religious-advocacy organizations working on all sorts of issues. Recently, the increasing number of religious-advocacy or lobby organizations working on policy issues has attracted some attention; see the Norad report 7/2013 on religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the United Nations (*Lobbying for Faith and Family: A Study of Religious NGOs at the United Nations*) and the Pew Research Center's report on religious advocacy groups in Washington, D.C., published in 2012 (*Lobbying for the Faithful: Religious Advocacy Groups in Washington, D.C.*). Both reports are available online.

dilemmas of our age' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014). Johnson, however, speaks of a 'rift between advocacy and analysis' and is keen to preserve his 'critical distance from that which we study' (Johnson 2014).

Advocacy is not a no-cost activity, and 'there is no romance in this' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014). Moreover, the work does not always have the desired effects or much of a societal impact and often happens on a very minor scale. Most scholars would not want to invest their limited resources in advocacy because it is costly to our scholarly projects and our careers. For example, advocacy hardly counts in tenure reviews. Marquardt bravely reports that she refuses to 'to engage in a cost-benefit calculus' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014). However, she works 'at an institution that is more supportive of blending research, teaching, and advocacy. In fact, at my institution, which is a school of theology, this engagement with religious communities and civil society is part of the training that students must have' (Marquardt and Vásquez 2014). Indeed, the website of her school states: 'Candler School of Theology prepares real people to make a real difference in the real world' by educating church leaders and ministers (<http://www.candler.emory.edu/about/index.cfm>; accessed 18 January 2014). This aim is a long way from the aims of study of religion's departments or programs published on an international sample of university websites (see Melvær and Stausberg 2013), which may reflect the way the discipline is commonly understood. Does it still come more naturally for theology-affiliated scholars to engage in advocacy activities? And is it only the fact that Vásquez works at a different kind of institution, a public research university, or is it also his being part of other scholarly networks with a different kind of disciplinary outlook that explains why he has not (yet) entered the mode of advocacy activities in a stricter sense of the term?

It is noteworthy that the book Marquardt and Vásquez reflect on in their article dealt with illegal immigrants and the project Marquardt became involved in is a hospitality house where families of detained immigrants visiting a detention center can stay overnight. Neither the illegal migrants studied in their co-authored book nor the people benefitting from the hospitality house are primarily defined in religious terms. Another reason why advocacy may not be that prominent an activity in the study of religion's may well be that religion is not among the most prominent explicit concerns requiring intervention. Religion, as Beaman points out in her article, 'has been foregrounded as an identity category in policy, public discussion and the media during the past decade or so, especially when there is something negative to be said' (Beaman 2014). While the legitimizing rhetoric of our discipline is the claim of relevance of religion (see Melvær and Stausberg 2013), probably religion is not such a big issue after all compared to other concerns, or if it is, it is far more subtly interwoven with other problems that call for advocacy.

Ultimately, the importance of advocacy depends on the aims and scope of the study of religion's (see Melvær and Stausberg 2013). If the discipline opens itself to calls for direct 'societal relevance' to a greater extent, advocacy will gain greater prominence. The agenda of this thematic issue is not to push this line of thinking, or to encourage colleagues to become advocates, but to provide insight into and reflection on this often neglected sphere of activity of scholars of religion.

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