

## Josef Sorett, Columbia University



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Let's face it: In our guild, more often than not, the term "public" is akin to a four-letter word. For many, placing the word public in front of intellectual, at best, creates a lesser species, and at worst, invokes an oxymoron. A rather crude academic orthodoxy — we all pick it up in graduate school — is that to go public is to dumb down. One can't possibly address the public — read: be popular, accessible, etc. — and still be smart (or maintain intellectual integrity), the logic goes.

Still, even if such thinking is widely accepted as the norm, socialization into the academy is anything but consistent in this regard. Rather, in embarking upon a career as a scholar one encounters a barrage of mixed messages. A flurry of free-floating anxiety attached to public talk is almost a rite of passage into the profession. This takes pronounced form in the burgeoning programs on all of our campuses — in part, meant to help remedy a less than robust academic job market — that suggest the would-be PhD consider work beyond the campus. Then, as invitations are sent out for panels on the public value of the PhD, we learn that university

presses are attempting to do more (i.e., reach a wider audience) with less (i.e., accept fewer manuscripts). Thus we are asked to consider nonacademic careers while compiling lists for qualifying exams. And though we are disciplined to please a committee of three, we are encouraged to write more accessibly. We are advised to be public even as we are trained not to be so.

I am not calling for a particular PhD track for public intellectuals by highlighting such inconsistencies. Nor am I pushing for revised tenure criteria. Yet I do think there is value in reflecting upon our common thinking on the subject. Such reasoning — an often uncritical dismissal en masse — seems symptomatic of the same flaws that are projected onto all things “public.” To be sure, nothing can take the place of extensive reading, research, and sustained reflection prior to publication. And, yes, substantive analysis probably does suffer a certain violence when leant in service of a news cycle. But must an appeal to the public necessarily mean all of the above? Is there not a way to unsettle the slippery slope that flattens out the differences between public intellectual, celebrity commentator, and sound-byte wordsmith all at once? My thinking here is informed by Jonathan Z. Smith’s appeal for scholars of religion to clarify the “preinterpretive decisions and operations” that animate our research. Smith’s call seems equally relevant for our perspectives on “the public.” Certainly there are more helpful ways to think about the relationship between our work and the variety of communities with whom we are often already in conversation.

One avenue might turn our attention to instances where the “public” is already a part of our scholarly pursuits. Consider some of the ongoing work that AAR already does with specific non-academy “publics,” such as the “Religion in the Prisons” and “Religion in the Schools” initiatives. Or more recently, there’s the “Beyond the Boundaries” program, which invites graduate students to present in a variety of “public” venues during each Annual Meeting. Beyond the AAR, we could also examine a couple of forums that rely so heavily upon our rank and file for their content. Here I am thinking about *Religion Dispatches*, and the Social Science Research Council’s

*Immanent Frame*  
(October 2007), as well as the more creative

<http://freq.uenci.es>

project, which blurs the line between analysis and performance. Each of these outlets extends academic debates into insightful commentary and analysis on religion in the public sphere. What might they teach us in terms of the generative possibilities and problems attendant to public work?

In the interest of full disclosure, I have always been a bit unclear as to what exactly a “nonpublic” intellectual looks like. Even if one does not write or speak to a popular audience, is there such thing as a “private” scholar whose work is not informed by (even if not addressed to)

nonacademic publics? Don't we all maintain commitments to multiple publics, a fact that no doubt informs our academic questions and arguments even (or perhaps more so) when we are unaware, or make every effort for it not to be so?

More than to invite or provide definitive answers, my questions here attempt simply to problematize a vision of the academic and the public as mutually exclusive, as well as to foreground the persistent stigma attached to the latter by the former. Our collective repulsion/fascination with the figure of the public intellectual — and the looming trope of the perils of “the public” — requires a closer reading. In assessing the merits of the multiple publics that are already with us, perhaps we can begin to identify a set of best “public” practices. And while the very language of “best practice” smacks of a professionalization of which Edward Said was highly critical, what I have in mind is in line with his vision of an “amateurism” that cares “for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession.” At a minimum, such a meta-reflection might help nurture a more *critical politics of the public* in the study of religion.