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RESEARCH NOTE

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Religion and public administration at the micro level: The lens of street-level bureaucracy theory in democracies

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Abstract

The dynamics between religion and state in public administration implementation theories has garnered scholarly interest over the past decade. However, these two realms of study are rarely combined. In this research note, I explore religion and, more specifically, the implementation of religion-based policies by street-level bureaucrats, as a public service like any other. I point to the more commonly studied aspect of this realm, namely the influence of personal religious tendencies on the exercise of discretion by the individual street-level bureaucrat. Further, I discuss the supply of religion-based services by street-level bureaucrats in democracies, and the actions they are willing to take (such as promote co-production or policy entrepreneurship) when religion constraints them from supplying certain public services.

Points for practitioners:

- Street-level bureaucrats are influenced by their religious perceptions during policy implementation.
- These workers may also be constrained by religion-based policies during implementation, hence provide

inadequate public services or not supplying them at all.
- Citizens may be dissatisfied with the inadequate services and the burdens it imposes on their lives.
- Street-level bureaucrats who cannot supply certain services due to religion-based constraints may take on co-production or policy entrepreneurship strategies outside the standard scope of their job description in order to supply them.

KEYWORDS
citizens' dissatisfaction, public administration, religion and state, street-level bureaucracy theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

What is the role of religion in public administration, and more specifically within micro-level street-level bureaucracy theories? Scholarship on religion and state has been studied within different points of view in comparative politics (Gill, 2001; Stepan, 1988, 2000), international relations (Dark, 2000; Fox, 2001; Fox et al., 2004, pp. 9–10), political economy (Gauthier, 2016; Yelle, 2018), political philosophy (Laborde & Bardon, 2017; Ungureanu & Monti, 2017), public policy (Farrow, 2004; Minkenberg, 2002; Pavolini et al., 2017), and partially, as will be illustrated in this research note, in public administration (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

The study of the relationships between religion and state through the lens of public administration is intriguing. This is because religion may be considered a paradigmatic case study—a public service provided to citizens just like any other service. Indeed, religion and public administration are generally understood as two distinctive domains of thought and action, and the influence of religion has so far been overlooked in public administration research at all levels of analysis, i.e. micro, meso, and macro, (see Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). This notion has prompted several scholars to argue that academicians should focus on the question of what role religion has in the practice of public administration (Cunningham, 2005; Freeman & Houston, 2010; Houston et al., 2008; Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

Significant liberal thinking on the separation of religion and state would benefit scholars investigating religion in public administration. In mainstream theories, religion is perceived as a variable that distorts ethical practice and tends to reduce the process of human decision-making to a calculus that bypasses the uncertainties of life in time (Nussbaum, 2004, 2012). According to Rawls and Habermas, laws and public policies should be justified only in neutral terms, that is in terms of reasons that people holding conflicting worldviews could accept, not religious ones (Habermas, 2008; Sikka, 2016; Yates, 2007). Despite that, research combining these two realms of study is lacking in all levels of public administration.

This research note focusses on the lowest level of public administration, namely the micro level, to restart an academic discussion combining religion in public administration. This is highly interesting, since both religion and street-level public administration seek to meet the

needs of their clients (see Cunningham, 2005, p. 949). In this research note, I present the state of the art in combining these two areas of study at the micro level—that is the influence of religion on the exercise of discretion by individual street-level bureaucrats, a realm that is every so often discussed in academic literature, and secondly, the supply of religion-based services at the street level (namely services based upon state policies that incorporate religion into the state's legal–institutional arrangements), which lacks academic treatment. I further point to religion and, more specifically, to the supply of religion-based services by street-level bureaucrats, as public services like any other, making the realm of religion in service delivery a paradigmatic case study.

Including religion as a factor in micro-level public administration literature is important for four distinct reasons. Theoretically, it illustrates that religion is simply an additional component that shapes the street-level bureaucrat's discretion, just like their other characteristics such as gender, race, culture, level of education, socio-economic status, and more. It further allows scholars to compare the influence of these factors (as well as locate their co-variance) on the design of street-level innovation strategies, such as in co-production and/or policy entrepreneurship. Practically, it allows controlling religion as a factor in the street-level bureaucrats/managers' daily interaction with clients. Normatively, it eliminates the perceived negative bias on the influence of religion on the implementer. This is because other components, as described above, might share similar effects. Methodologically, treating religion as any other public service allows comparing democratic states that separate state and religion and those that do not or separate them to a lesser extent. Therefore, it challenges the argument that religion is basically incompatible with democracy (Anderson, 2004; Minkenberg, 2007) and thus expands the range of case selection for researchers in this realm of study.

Hence, in this research note, I illustrate that there are different extents of religious pluralism in democracies as evident in the degree of religious influences on their regime's legal–institutional arrangements (see Ongaro & Tantardini [2023b, 2023c] on the spectrum of *religious regimes*), which consequently causes some states not to supply certain public services due to their inherent religion-based institutional constraints on policy, hence causing societal dissatisfaction among different groups in society. Therefore, street-level bureaucrats can use their discretion to supply the missing services that religion-based constraints preclude, using creative–innovative co-production and/or other entrepreneurial strategies.

Finally, I suggest future research directions that should be carried out by scholars studying religion in public administration at the micro level, but also point out that this should include higher levels of analysis.

2 | POLICY IMPLEMENTATION, PERSONAL IDEOLOGY, AND DISCRETION IN STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY THEORY

2.1 | Discretion at the street level

The literature on policy implementation emphasizes the significant role of street-level bureaucrats in the shaping of public policy (Brodkin, 2011; Cohen, 2012; Diab & Cohen, 2022; Evans & Harris, 2004; Gofen, 2013; Golan-Nadir, 2021; Hupe & Hill, 2015; Lavee & Strier, 2019; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022). They are de facto policymakers in the sense that they informally construct or reconstruct organisational policies, thereby directly influencing the lives of many individuals (Brodkin, 1990; Hill & Hupe, 2014). Their discretion is crucial in

aligning the policy requirements with the demands of the field (Bell & Smith, 2022; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). Through their daily decision-making, they leverage resources to achieve desired policy outcomes (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022). Street-level bureaucrats possess the discretionary power to handle individuals (Lipsky, 2010). They are key players in any policy implementation process (Brodkin, 2011; Evans & Harris, 2004; Keiser, 2010; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2022; Thomann, 2015). Hence, they enjoy the official mandate to implement the policy and are granted the latitude to do so using substantial discretion (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

The discretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats is considered to be a crucial element to perform their duties (Gofen, 2013; Golan-Nadir et al., 2022; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014), as they adapt the designed policy to meet the actual needs of citizens (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022). Bureaucratic discretion implies the idea of a public agency operating with considerable latitude in implementing broad policy mandates set by legislative bodies (Bryner, 1987). It represents a range of choices within a set of parameters that guide the behaviour of individual service providers (Lipsky, 2010; Prottas, 1979). This discretionary power makes street-level bureaucrats essential players in the provision of public service as it allows them to interpret subjectively how policy should be delivered (Lipsky, 2010).

Literature stresses that individual characteristics of street-level bureaucrats highly influence their exercise of discretion. In this regard, their ideological perspectives are a critical component (Bergen & While, 2005; Freeman & Houston, 2010), which are partly determined by their social background (Virtanen, 2000). Lipsky (2010) highlights the individual practitioner by underscoring the importance of ideology for the process. Others observed that personal attitudes and values of street-level bureaucrats affect how they interpret information presented by their clients (Keiser, 2010), as they are committed to values influencing their discretion (Friedson, 2001).

2.2 | Religion and street-level bureaucracy

One of the relatively more studied areas in religion and public administration,[1] at the micro level, is the influence of religion on individual street-level bureaucrats. Some scholars in public administration have acknowledged the important role that religion plays in the work (Bruce, 1994; Bruce & Novinson, 1999; Garcia-Zamor, 2003; King, 2000) and management (Fairholm, 2001) of public administrators. Religion is also evident and persuasive in shaping ethical attitudes, moral reasoning, and management behaviour of many public administrators (Briskin, 1998; Freeman & Houston, 2010; Haughey, 1989; King, 2007; Lowery, 2005; Sunder, 2011).

Within this literature, the level of religiosity among street-level bureaucrats is considered to highly influence their discretion in different realms. For example, research has shown that street-level bureaucrats, such as teachers, use tradition, prejudice, dogma, and ideology to justify their practices (Ball, 1997). Similarly, studies have shown that the religious beliefs of social workers allows them to view religious activities as appropriate professional behaviours (Mattison et al., 2000). Other studies have highlighted the role of physicians' beliefs found to affect the treatment of their patients (Chibnall & Brooks, 2001; Kipo-Sunyehzi, 2022), and street-level bureaucrats may unevenly implement secularly reformed marriage laws based on their belief-driven discretion (Engelcke, 2018; Golan-Nadir et al., 2022). Other literature has emphasised religion-based discrimination is observed in service provision by school principals (Pfaff et al., 2021) and public officials (Adam et al., 2022). Further, religion was argued as basis for discrimination through which marginalisation and exclusion are reproduced in the realm of citizenship and

citizen agency (Carswell et al., 2019). Similarly, some studies found that street-level bureaucrats providing social welfare services to immigrants were in part hostile towards them due to their religion, among other components (Ulutaş, 2021).

Moreover, studies have indicated that religious members of public organisations have more unshakable ideas about moral principles and are more likely to act as whistleblowers (Barnett et al., 1996). Lowery (2005) found that there is a deep connection between religious beliefs and professional lives of public administrators. Gilad and Alon-Barkat (2018) further argue that there is a significant variation among bureaucrats regarding the perceived conflict between their identity as members of bureaucracies or professions and as members of societal groups. This may mean that some bureaucrats do not see their religious views as conflicting with their work, that is influencing their discretion. In a more normative sense, Bisesi and Lidman (2009) in their study on religion, spirituality, and public administration argue that organisations with pronounced religious perspectives should play roles in the delivery of public services and informing public decision-making. Other studies have indicated that the individual's religious exposure and experiences also increase motivation in public sector (Farmer, 2005; Freeman, & Houston, 2010; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Perry, 1997). This is highly relevant as, some argue, the workplace has become an insecure and alienating environment; therefore, the need for addressing the spiritual side has arisen (Collins & Kakabadse, 2006).

These studies focus on the role religion holds in shaping street-level bureaucrats' discretion, which is considered their most valuable tool (Brodkin, 2011; Evans & Harris, 2004; Keiser, 2010; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2022; Thomann, 2015), while providing various services. In such cases, citizens might experience dissatisfaction with policy implementation due to the impact of religion on the individual street-level bureaucrat's discretion. However, this literature does not investigate the mere supply of religion-based services by street-level bureaucrats in democracies, where several religious components are incorporated into legal–institutional arrangements. Within such cases, we might envision acute societal dissatisfaction with policy implementation as some services are simply not available due to religious constraints on policy, and not because of the mere personal religious tendency of the implementer, that might influence his/her discretion.

2.3 | Religion as a public service causing citizens' dissatisfaction—A lacuna in the literature

In the case of religion, policy implementation resulting from the designed policy may lead to societal dissatisfaction. Overall, implementation results from policy, which defines the range of actions implementers are allowed to take. Within this micro-level theory, it is widely argued that street-level bureaucrats, as the implementers of policy, can use their broad discretion to make decisions when providing services (Bell & Smith, 2022; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

At this point, it can be argued that street-level bureaucrat's discretion is shaped through three distinct components: First, the policy as designed, namely the range of actions they are *allowed* to take due to the existing policy's constraints. The second component is their level of religiosity that might *influence* the way they interpret the policy in the process of exercising discretion. The third component is their extent of commitment to the citizen–client, namely the actions they are *willing* to take outside the scope of their positions in order to supply their clients with the missing services, which more religion-based policies might preclude. This can be achieved through co-production and/or entrepreneurship strategies. Evidently, this is a highly intriguing conundrum, as it raises

the question of 'triple loyalty'—are street-level bureaucrats more loyal to the policy as designed, their personal–religious worldview, or to their clients, for whom they might dirty their hands and are sometimes even willing to risk their jobs (Golan-Nadir & Cohen, 2017; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022)?

Hence, using the study of religion at the micro level of public administration may mean identifying the source of dissatisfaction with resulting services in day-to-day implementation of policy by street-level bureaucrats and searching for the opportunities (Lavee & Cohen, 2019) where they attempt to exit the classic street-level framework to take on innovative entrepreneurship strategies and provide public services that the policy overlooks in order to satisfy the citizen, even if it is against their personal belief (Arnold, 2015, 2021, 2022; Golan-Nadir, 2021). Such a theoretical notion of religion in public administration is hardly ever studied.

While studying religion and micro-level public administration, scholars should consider case selection, as religion is institutionalised differently across cases. Diverse, long-standing national traditions are said to endure in public administration systems, despite ongoing reforms, in both Western democracies and non-democracies (Painter & Peters, 2010). Associated with tradition, religion holds profound importance in democracies, and in some cases, it is well vested in the very idea of nationalism (Brubaker, 2012; Smith, 2003). This is because most states are located at different points along the continuum of separation between religion and state (Fergusson, 2004, pp. 168–169; see Schmidt, 2011). For example, in France, there is a strict separation of the church-based religion and state. In the United States, separation is understood as the exclusion of the state from the affairs of religion and the corresponding exclusion of religion from the affairs of the state. In other European democracies, various forms of secularism allow some state support for a single religion (Bhargava, 2014). In the case of non-democratic Muslim states, the Muslim tradition among non-Western others illustrates how transition shapes the range of options in policy implementation (Pierre, 2010). The influence of institutional Islamic public administration is further traced in European states, as the latter are successor states to the Ottoman Empire, with its own specific Islamic administrative system (Drechsler, 2014, 2015, 2018). When analysing Western democracies, it is evident that the predominance of religion in these societies has changed profoundly in the last few centuries, with the continuing multiplication of new options, religious, spiritual, and also anti-religious, making faith only one human possibility among others at the private sphere (Taylor, 2007, 2009). Such societal diversity or heterogeneity might cause dissatisfaction among different groups sharing public services constrained by a single religious tendency.

Three recent studies have discussed the provision of religion-based services in the Israeli case, which serves as a crucial case study of a democratic state that, to a certain degree, does not separate state and religion, and can be recognised as an *identification of state and religion* (as defined by Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023b, 2023c). The first study argues that street-level bureaucrats' exercise of discretion while implementing the Israeli religious marriage policy in a narrow-scoped conservative way, and in accordance with the religious implementer's worldview, increases citizens' dissatisfaction with the public marital service. Consequently, such conservatism in service provided has encouraged several street-level bureaucrats to initiate solutions for citizens who were not able to receive religious marital services in their initial conservative form (Golan-Nadir et al., 2022).

The second study indicates that Israeli governmental hospitals provide a wide range of religion-based services that go beyond the state's basic constitutional requirements due to intense inter-hospital competition. The latter is argued to be a result from the hospitals rabbis' (who are street-level bureaucrats) policy entrepreneurship initiatives to attract as many clients as possible to their hospital for financial reasons (Golan-Nadir, 2021). The third study points out the

inadequate public transport services in Israel due to religious policy constraints. It explores the co-productive efforts made by street-level managers in co-producing public transport services with non-governmental organisations at the local level (Golan-Nadir & Christensen, 2023). These studies show that when street-level bureaucrats are constrained by the policy as designed and cannot supply services that citizens need and/or want, they may take a leap of faith and co-produce it or take on policy entrepreneurship strategies to create it, regardless of their personal worldview.

These three studies contribute to this emerging field of study by examining a case study of a democracy where religion is largely embedded in state policies (i.e. Israel as a crucial case study). Such a case study highlights legal–institutional constraints on public service supply due to religious restrictions and, consequently, shows the actions taken by street-level bureaucrats to supply the missing services in varied and creative ways as a result of their wide-ranged discretion. This is even if providing the service is at odds with their personal world-view. Hence, these studies provide a preliminary theoretical framework to test these hypotheses in other case studies.

Nonetheless, one of the limitations of these studies is the specific time, place, and context in which they were conducted. Thus, it cannot be claimed that precisely the same causal mechanism will operate in all circumstances, namely in other democracies that separate state and religion to different extents. Furthermore, methodologically, these studies are mostly tested using qualitative measures (using a positivistic approach) to empirically test street-level bureaucrat's actions and establish causality. Within these studies, quantitative measures are mainly used to measure public opinion with regard to inadequate public services due to religion-based policy constraints (i.e. independent variable). Quantifying the street-level bureaucrat's actions (i.e. dependent variable) seems to be a hurdle these studies did not overcome, due to restrictions on access to governmental data and lacking documentation by the street-level workers.

3 | IMPLICATIONS: NATURE, IMPORTANCE, AND PURPOSE OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Possible future research in this field of study in terms of research problems and potential methodologies to be employed can provide researchers with multiple paths and methods of study.

First, at the micro level, future research in different democratic states should investigate diverse aspects and extents of gaps between religion-based policies as designed and the implementation of its related services. It should deeply examine whether, in cases of dissatisfied citizens, the source of disappointment is with the extent of religion incorporated in public policy and the consequent limited public services, or is it with the actual discretion-led implementation of these policies by street-level bureaucrats. In any event, it should study the actions street-level bureaucrats are willing to take in order to overcome religious constraints on service provision, such as co-production and/or policy entrepreneurship.

Specifically, this realm of research should explore which factors encourage street-level bureaucrats to initiate inadequate services. Such studies will improve our understanding of this critical aspect and welcome religion as a factor in public administration. Furthermore, it should examine additional mediating variables that might influence the street-level bureaucrat's response to societal dissatisfaction with public services that are constrained by religion. For example, to what extent, gender, socio-economic status, size of organisation, professional relationship with supervisors, extent of caring for the client–citizen, and satisfaction with their position motivate street-level bureaucrats to innovatively produce services that religion-based policies prevent?

Empirically, studying religion in public administration calls for the investigation of various factors both bottom-up (civilly based) and top-down (political and organisational). Ideally, it calls for a mixed-method approach. The need for diverse sources of data necessitates that the researcher employs mixed data collection tools and analysis to exhaust the different points of view and incorporate them, at the final discussion and conclusion phases, into coherent knowledge. Therefore, both quantitative tools to measure public opinion and qualitative tools to measure legal–organisational arrangements and personal sentiments by street-level bureaucrats and managers should be employed. Though training should be considered, big data tools can also be a powerful instrument in measuring overall street-level work, including computerised organisational documentation and inner correspondence (if access to the field is authorised).

Finally, with the advance of studying religion in public administration in several case studies, this realm of study calls for the use of the comparative method. The great merit of comparing case studies allows higher validation of hypotheses as it provides researchers with multiple designs and sample sizes (both Large *N* and small *n*) to establish causality. Indeed, a theoretical framework that tests street-level implementation of religion-based policies can be applied in different democratic states, regardless of the extent of separation of religion and state. Examples of such cases are abundant. In Israel, the Rabbinical establishment decides on matters of marriage (only religious), *kashrut* (Kosher law) in the public sphere, and Shabbat (including a ban on public transport during the Shabbat) (see Golan-Nadir, 2022; Golan-Nadir & Christensen, 2023). In the secular Republic of Turkey, the state institution of *Diyanet* (The Directorate General for Religious Affairs) controls religion, as its employees are street-level bureaucrats with the monopoly to regulate and provide religion-based services for Sunni Muslims (Bardakoglu, 2004; Göçmen, 2014). Other more liberal regimes treat religion with different nuances. In the United States and Britain, faith-based organisations are involved in the delivery of services, and they can apply for state funding (Zehavi, 2008). In Norway, the state's church is predominantly funded by the state, as are the services provided to religious communities (Schmidt, 2011). In Italy, citizens may donate a portion of their taxes to the Catholic Church or other churches/religions which have signed an agreement with the state to supply religion-based services (Martino, 2015). These cases are comparable.

Consequently, while the described realm of research explores data about the relationship between religion and state, the theoretical framework suggested here can apply to different policies in other areas (e.g. tax collection, social work, the environment, education, and more). Evidently, other monopolised services (or lack of services due to policy restrictions) that cause public dissatisfaction and thus harvest implementers' reaction exist in many policies. Hence, in terms of transferability, religion may be considered a paradigmatic case study in street-level bureaucracy, just as in any other realm.

4 | CONCLUSION

As shown in this research note, in the realm of public administration and religion, the dissatisfaction of citizens with public services may occur at the micro level, namely with policy implementation by street-level bureaucrats. Hence, the relevance of religion to public administration at the micro level, and more specifically as relating to the street-level bureaucracy theory, is substantial in two ways: (1) the influence of religion on the exercise of discretion by individual street-level bureaucrats—which is more commonly studied, and (2) the supply of religion-based services by street-level bureaucrats, as well as their reactions vis-à-vis citizens' dissatisfaction with

inadequate public services due to religious constraints—which is hardly studied. Indeed, combining the realms of religion and micro-level street-level bureaucracy theory is essential since the democratic state's separation of religion and state is by no means comprehensive, and various religion-based policies exist in Western democracies.

Importantly, the perception of religion as a barrier to the provision of certain public services was not presented here as a normatively negative phenomenon, but as an issue with both positive and negative aspects. Certainly, despite the fact that religion can enable the supply of certain wide-range services, in some instances it prevents others. Most prominent examples of enablement include the role of da'wah (evangelisation) in Islam, missionary work in Christianity, as well as *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) in Judaism. These actions may plausibly have increased the breadth and quality of public services provided by street-level bureaucrats. On the other hand, religion constrains the provision of other services (e.g. Israel allows only religious marriage, in most Western democracies the mandatory official day of rest aligns with the religious Sunday, and more). Therefore, religion for the purpose of street-level provision of services was modelled here as a constraint, rather than an enabler of public service provision.

Finally, despite the fact that this research note focused on the micro-level public administration, the religious variable in higher levels of public administration (e.g. meso [organisations] and macro [systems] levels) (see Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023a) should be further investigated to establish the notion that religion in public administration indeed matters.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No data are available for this research note.

NOTE

[1]This strand of literature usually uses the term 'spirituality' as interrelated to religion. Evidently many authors associate it with religion, while others beg to differ (see Garcia-Zamor, 2003, pp. 355–356). Yet, for this research note, I focus the discussion solely on religion.

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