

# Thinking Sociologically About Religion: A Step Change In The Debate?

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QUALITY DATA ON RELIGION

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More than once in the last two decades, I have been invited to write a chapter or an article about the current state of the sociology of religion. Two of these stand out in my mind. The first took the form of a contribution to an encyclopaedia on religion and society (Davie 1998). A dominant theme in this article concerned the different trajectories of religion in different parts of the world and the effect that these had on academic reflection. The contrast between the relative secularity of Europe and the continuing religious activity in large parts of the United States was central to this discussion. Very different approaches to the discipline have emerged as a result: in Europe, secularization has remained a (if not the) leading theory; in the US, this is much less the case. In the latter, rational choice theory is the preferred paradigm. Nothing has changed in this respect. It is abundantly clear that the sociology of religion reflects the context in which it finds itself. It is also conditioned by widely differing cultural and academic traditions, not to mention the institutional settings (universities, government agencies, pastoral institutes, etc.) in which it is conducted.

The second piece was published in 2007. This was a book-length treatment of the sociology of religion, commissioned by Sage as part of their *New Horizons in Sociology* series (Davie 2007). The opening pages of this volume introduce the thread that runs through the book: the notion of a critical agenda, understanding ‘critical’ in two ways. The agenda in the sociology of religion is critical in that we need to get it right; religion is a crucially important issue in the modern world about which students (and indeed others) need to be properly informed. But I was critical in the sense that I was not at all sure that the profession—those who call themselves sociologists of religion—were responding to this challenge as well as they should. I argued as follows:

I do not want to sound negative: a great deal of excellent work is being done in this field. There remains, however, a deep-seated resistance to the notion that it is entirely normal in most parts of the world, to be both fully modern and fully religious. To overturn this resistance, both in the sociology of religion and in the social sciences more generally, is the principal aim of this book. (Davie 2007, ix)

It is interesting to reflect on this claim some three to four years later. Is the implied critique still justified? In the pages that follow, I will argue that there has been something of a step change in the debate: there has been a real attempt in the sub-discipline to confront the realities of religion in the modern world. What, then, has happened to justify this claim? Where and how has this change taken place? And why has it occurred? These are the questions that frame the argument of this paper. Two things will become clear in the discussion: both that a

great deal of work has been accomplished, but that this in turn is generating new and urgent questions. It is these questions that constitute the concluding section of this paper.

### **Evidence of change**

In terms of the topic itself (the visibility of religion in the modern world), it is generally agreed that the final decades of the twentieth century mark a turning point. Three pivotal events encapsulate this shift. These were the Iranian revolution of 1979, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001. All of them raised questions—unexpected ones—about religion. Why was it, for example, that a pro-Western, relatively secularized Shah was obliged to flee before an Iranian Ayatollah clearly motivated by conservative readings of Islam? Such a scenario had not been anticipated. And why was it that an aggressively secular ideology, not a religious one, collapsed so comprehensively throughout the Soviet bloc—a part of the world that has seen subsequently a marked, if uneven, renaissance of both Christianity and Islam? And why, finally, did the terrifying events of 9/11 come as such a bolt from the blue? Quite simply, the unimaginable had happened, requiring—amongst many other things—a radical rethinking of the paradigms that are supposed to explain, indeed to predict, the events of the modern world.

Gilles Kepel, a distinguished French scholar writing in the 1990s, describes this situation as follows:

Around 1975 the whole process [of secularization] went into reverse. A new religious approach took shape, aimed not only at adapting to secular values but at recovering a sacred foundation for the organization of society—by changing society if necessary. Expressed in a multitude of ways, this approach advocated moving on from a modernism that had failed, attributing its setbacks and dead ends to separation from God. The theme was no longer *aggiornamento* but a ‘second evangelization of Europe’: the aim was no longer to modernize Islam but to ‘Islamize modernity’. Since that date this phenomenon has spread throughout the world. (Kepel 1994, 2)

How then were Western scholars to deal with this shift, given that their work was very largely premised not only on the understanding that modern societies would be secular societies, but that "being secular" was, in itself, a good thing?

In terms of scholarship, one of the first things to emerge was a substantial body of work on both sides of the Atlantic concerned with *fundamentalism*—a term that was widely, if not always wisely, used in public debate. Such an approach is nicely exemplified by an American example, which became known as the "Fundamentalism Project," established at the University of Chicago in the late 1980s. The project gathered a distinguished team of scholars from many different parts of the world, brought together to document and to explain the rapid and unexpected growth of distinctive forms of religious life in almost every global region. The details of the team, their working methods, and the impressive series of publications that emanated from the meetings are easily documented.<sup>i</sup> Even more important, however, are the motivations that lay behind this work and the finance made available to execute the task. Clearly this hugely expensive endeavor was indicative of concern on the part of American academia, and the foundations that resource them, about the forms of religion that were increasingly visible on a global scale. Something had to be done. In this sense the Fundamentalism Project is as much part of the sociological story as it is a body of knowledge about fundamentalism itself. Peter Berger (1999) is even more provocative in his comments: the assumption that we need both to document and to understand the nature of fundamentalism by means of a research project of this stature tells us as much about American academics as it does about fundamentalism itself.<sup>ii</sup> Their European equivalents were, if anything, even more perplexed.

Simplifying a necessarily complex story, the situation can be summarized as follows: by this stage, religion (in all its diversity) was no longer invisible to the academic community; it was, however, increasingly constructed as a "problem." The problem moreover was more and more present in Western societies, not least in Europe—brought there by immigration. And if it was one thing to acknowledge changes taking place on the other side of the world, it was quite another to admit that they were there on the doorstep. A related point follows from this: these very evident trends were initially seen in terms of ethnicity rather than religion. In other words, the consequences of immigration were acknowledged in some respects, but not in others. Racial or ethnic differences, moreover, were easier for social scientists to deal with within their existing paradigms than their religious equivalents. Bit by bit, however, the mismatch between the perceptions of Western scholars, and the preferred identities of the incoming communities that were establishing themselves had to be acknowledged, a debate in which the presence of Islam was central. However unexpected, religion and religious differences became increasingly present in the public agendas of European societies. What followed was a delayed reaction.

Denial gradually gave way to alarm, generating an impressive array of publically funded research programmes, a wide variety of government initiatives, and a flood of publications. A selection of these will be outlined in the following section.

Before embarking on this list, two interconnected issues require attention. The first relates to the difference between reality and perception. Is it the case that religion has "returned" to a world from which it was absent for most of the twentieth century? Or is this primarily a question of perception? Western social scientists are now obliged to take notice of something that they had ignored for several decades. Or is it a combination of both these things? My own view is that the third alternative comes closest to the truth: religion has been continually present in almost every part of the world, but it is currently asserting itself in innovative and very visible ways. This shift is nicely captured by looking at the evolution of the World Council of Churches (WCC)—a global organization that, by definition, has always paid attention to religion.

Officially founded in 1948, the WCC became the channel through which the varied streams of ecumenical life that already existed in the churches were brought together. At the same time, it was a movement that reflected a whole series of initiatives aimed at establishing and maintaining world peace. In its early years, the WCC was deeply influenced by the Cold War and its consequences for church life. It looked for ways to overcome the divisions between East and West, especially in Europe—encouraging, as far as this was possible, contacts with the churches in Central and Eastern Europe. Post-1989, however, the context has altered radically. The Cold War has given way to a very different reading of international affairs, within which religion emerges as a highly significant variable. And to the surprise of many—not only the advocates of the ecumenical movement—it was the conservative, even reactionary forms of religion (both Christian and non-Christian) that were growing fastest in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Hence the dilemma for an organization founded on two assumptions: first, that the world would become an increasingly secular place; and second, that the best way forward in this situation was for the churches most open to change and most attentive to the modern world (notably the liberal Protestants) to group together in order to sustain each other in a necessarily hostile environment. The churches that resisted the "world" would automatically consign themselves to the past. Both assumptions were incorrect. The world is not "an increasingly secular place"; it is full of very different forms of religious life, many of which are expanding rather than

contracting. It is moreover, the forms of religion least interested in ecumenism that are developing with the greatest confidence. Coming to terms with such shifts constitutes a major challenge to the WCC.

Social scientists are similarly discomfited. Not only must they acknowledge the renewed significance of religion in the modern world order, but they are obliged to accept the forms that it currently takes – whether or not they find these congenial. Such a statement brings us necessarily to the second issue. Is it possible for scholars of religion to move on from their present position? Is it possible in other words for religion, in all its inherent diversity, to cease to be a problem and to become instead an entirely "normal" feature of the late-modern world? In my own work, I have tried to encourage this shift by arguing that it is as modern to draw from the religious to critique the secular, as it is to draw from the secular to critique the religious. *It is the quality of the argument that counts* (Davie 2002).

### **New initiatives**

Whatever the motivation, an unprecedented amount of work is now in progress. The following examples are selective but they are sufficient to indicate the kind of thing that is happening. For the most part, they draw from the European case in that the shift in perspective is even more striking here than in other parts of the world. Not only is Europe regarded as a relatively secular global region, it is European (specifically French) understandings of the Enlightenment that lie behind the paradigms that are predicated on the assumption that to be modern means to be secular. How, then, are European scholars, and those who fund their research, responding to the current situation?

It is important first of all to differentiate between projects and programmes. There have always been research *projects* relating to religion, many of which have yielded significant data, not to mention new ways of thinking. These have been valuable initiatives. In the last half decade, however, something rather different has appeared: that is, a series of research *programmes*, which are designed to gather together a wide variety of projects and to ensure that the latter add up to more than the sum of their parts. It is the systematic approach to the study of religion which is new. This development, together with the strikingly generous funding that supports it, is growing in momentum.

Given that I am a British sociologist of religion, I will start with the British case. The Religion and Society Research Programme, funded jointly by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council, exemplifies the trend perfectly.<sup>iii</sup> This £12 million initiative, running from 2007 to

2012, is without precedent in the UK. It is designed to stimulate collaborative research across the arts, humanities, and social sciences and has done precisely that—the range of projects contained in the programme is impressive. The work, moreover, is innovative: the researchers are asking new things in new ways, and they are discovering creative methodologies to achieve their goals. The purpose of the Programme is unequivocal: it exists "to inform public debate and advance understanding about religion in a complex world." Specifically it aims to further both research and research capacity in the field of religion (with a strong emphasis on training), to facilitate knowledge exchange between the academic community and a wide variety of stakeholders (including the religious communities themselves), and to make links with similar ventures in different parts of the world. Two such ventures can be noted at this point: the remarkably similar Religions, State, and Society Programme funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation,<sup>iv</sup> and the Religion and Diversity Project, based at the University of Ottawa, which despite the term 'project' in the title is a major collaborative research initiative (MCRI) funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.<sup>v</sup> There are many others, both in Europe and beyond.<sup>vi</sup>

A parallel set of activities exists at the European, as opposed to national, level. Excellent examples can be found in the emphasis on religion found in the Sixth and Seventh Framework Programmes of the European Commission, both of which have supported a series of projects relating to the growing diversity of Europe and its consequences for economic, political, and social life.<sup>vii</sup> There is a strong, top-down emphasis in both Programmes on policy-making, revealed amongst other things in the close attention paid to social cohesion. Indeed the subtext, indicative perhaps of anxiety, is clear: is the growing religious diversity of Europe damaging to social cohesion, and if so, what is to be done? The projects themselves interrogate these questions in a wide variety of fields (politics, democracy, law, education, welfare), in which key values (tolerance, acceptance, respect, rights, responsibilities, inclusion, exclusion) are thoroughly explored. Many of these programmes foreground the presence and aspiration of minorities in Europe and the reactions of host societies to these groups. Identities can no longer be taken for granted in a part of the world where movement and migration are commonplace, including the movement of significant numbers of people from one part of Europe to another.

A third way of working can be found in university-wide programmes, which draw from the range of interests, skills, and training found in one institution, in order to foster imaginative and above all interdisciplinary work on a common theme. One such, "Religion in the 21st Century," was located in the

University of Copenhagen from 2003 to 2007—it was one of four Research Priority Areas established by the university. In this capacity, it "housed" more than 70 initiatives of various kinds, including a strong emphasis on the training of doctoral students.<sup>viii</sup> Somewhat similar is a Linnaeus Centre of Excellence hosted by the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University. This programme is entitled "The Impact of Religion—Challenges for Society, Law, and Democracy" and is jointly funded by the Swedish Research Council and the University itself. It brings together 40 researchers from six different faculties, including the hard sciences, and will run for ten years (2008–18).<sup>ix</sup>

The fact that so many initiatives have occurred at more or less the same time is, I contend, evidence of a step change in activity in the study of religion. The numbers of scholars involved in these programmes, their individual and joint publications, the conferences that they both host and attend and the impact that their work will have outside as well as inside the academy will undoubtedly make a difference. New knowledge will be generated in abundance, a new generation of scholars will be trained, and new possibilities for collaboration will emerge. Quite apart from this, new fields of study are becoming apparent almost by the day.

Three of these will be taken as examples: the growing significance of religion for law and law-making, new initiatives in medical practice, and the renewed attention to religion in connection with welfare. All three require the input of very different groups of scholars and have come about at much the same time. It is no coincidence, for instance that the inaugural meeting of the International Consortium for Law and Religion Studies (ICLARS) took place in 2009. The emphasis of this meeting was on state-church, or more accurately state-religion, relations, and it brought together constitutional lawyers from all over the world. Clearly the presence of new forms of religion and the aspirations of very different religious actors (both individuals and groups) are straining current arrangements—tensions were displayed in both the case studies and the more thematic papers presented at the meeting. A selection of these can be found in Ferrari and Cristofori (2010).

Human-rights lawyers are similarly engaged, recognizing that rights and freedoms often collide with each other. Freedom of expression (in the form of legitimate critique or satire), for example, is not always easy to distinguish from unwarranted criticism of religion, and legislation to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is likely to conflict with the rights of those who espouse more traditional forms of belief. There are no easy answers to these clashes of interest. Family lawyers, thirdly, are facing new issues—not least



the very definition of a family. The beginnings and ends of life are increasingly imprecise as medical technologies advance, and as the unimaginable becomes possible: a fetus can exist outside the womb, single-sex couples procreate, living wills are increasingly common and assisted suicide is legal in some parts of Europe. These, moreover, are all questions on which religious groups have strong and not always compatible views.

Reactions to the re-emergence of religion in late-modern societies are markedly contradictory—a tendency well illustrated by two medical examples. It is clear, on the one hand, that religious issues are taken far more seriously than they used to be in certain branches of modern medicine. Clinical psychiatry is a case in point. John Cox, for instance, advocates an approach that takes account of the whole person, acknowledging that more and more patients (notably those who come from overseas) present with "religious" symptoms. Such an approach draws very directly on the ideas and beliefs of Paul Tournier. Applied systematically, Tournier's "medicine of the person" (a turning away from the bio-medical model) could have far-reaching effects in many areas of health care (Cox et al. 2006). At the same time, however, certain forms of religious display are more consciously outlawed from the medical environment than used to be the case. In the spring of 2010, an English nurse refused either to remove or to hide a cross while working, and she was consequently moved to a desk job. She took her case to an industrial tribunal, which found against her.<sup>x</sup> Rightly or wrongly, comparisons were made with Muslims employed by the same hospital who were allowed to wear the hijab.

In terms of the argument of this paper, the two medical examples are doubly interesting in that the first regards the religion, or spirituality, as a resource in good medical practice, but the second quite clearly sees it a problem—as something that should be literally hidden from view. Such contradictions are not only commonplace in late-modern societies but are likely to continue. An important reason both for the inconsistencies themselves and for the intractability of the underlying issues lies in the fact that they hover on the edge of the public and the private. Simply deeming religion to be a private matter—the "traditional" European answer—is no longer an adequate solution, but what is? Serious attempts to resolve these questions drive a great deal of the current research agenda, in which many disciplines have a role to play. Reconciling both the rights and responsibilities of different groups of people requires insight from diverse bodies of knowledge.

A rather different point brings this section to a close. For a whole range of reasons (some internal and some external), late-modern societies find themselves in serious difficulty regarding the provision of welfare. Demand is rising, but resources are scarce and in the present economic climate are likely to become more so.

The focus of the debate varies from place to place, but the underlying themes are the same: the imbalance in the working and non-working sections of the population (especially the growth in the number of elderly people) and a growing awareness that the state can no longer provide from the cradle to the grave—a realization that leads in turn to a search for alternative providers. It is important to make a distinction at this point between the developed welfare states of many European societies and the very different ways of dealing with these issues in the US. In the latter, faith-based welfare has always been the norm rather than the exception, but even in Europe, policy-makers are looking again at faith communities as possible providers. In this sense, though sometimes grudgingly, religion is once again seen as a resource for the wider society (Backstrom, Davie, Edgardh, and Pettersson 2010; 2011).

### **New questions**

For all these reasons, religion is rising in the public agenda prompting renewed attention to the topic, expressed among other things in a vigorous research sector. As we have seen, much of this activity is policy-oriented and driven by the changing nature of society. It prompts, however, new questions for the sociology of religion. Three of these will be addressed as a conclusion to this paper: the notion of the post-secular, the degree to which theoretical approaches (both old and new) can be generalized, and the need to engage the mainstreams of social science in the study of religion. The discussion is brief, deliberately provocative, and recalls my earlier writing in this field.

The term 'post-secular' is widely used, but to mean very different things. For a start, it raises once again the possibility that perception may be more important than reality: the world is *deemed* post-secular because we have chosen to take notice of religion rather than to ignore it. The religious situation itself has not changed that much. 'Post-secular,' secondly, is rarely a neutral term. The increasing visibility of religion is welcome or less welcome depending on who you are, what you do, and where you are situated in society. Religion, thirdly, "returns" in many different ways—some of these are easier to accommodate than others, as indeed are the reactions they provoke. What has become known as the "new atheism," for example, is largely a response—a vehement one at that—to the re-emergence of religion in the *public* sphere. New atheists are much less concerned about private belief.

My own view is the following. I welcome the current debate concerning the post-secular and the growing body of literature that surrounds it (see for example Molendijk et al. 2010; Baker et al. 2011). Both are signs that religion is taken seriously—that is a good thing. The notion of the post-secular needs, however, considerable refinement. In Europe, for example, two rather different things are happening at once. It is true that religion has re-entered the public square in new and unexpected ways and is demanding a response. It is equally true that the process of secularization is continuing—remorselessly so in many places. As a result, large sections of the European population have lost the concepts, knowledge, and vocabulary that are necessary to talk about religion just when they need them most. It is for this reason that the standard of debate in many parts of Europe is so poor—an evidently worrying feature. A second strand of thinking draws on the work of David Martin: the post-secular, if it exists at all, is unlikely to be a single or unitary thing. It will be as patterned as its predecessor. Indeed for precisely this reason, Martin (2011) is highly suspicious of the term. The interactions of the religious and secular should rather be seen in the long-term. "Religious thrusts" and "secular recoils" have happened for centuries rather than decades and—crucially for Martin—*they work themselves out differently in different places*. The shorthand of "God is back" cannot do justice to this necessarily complex agenda.

Martin's more nuanced approach builds very directly on to his *General Theory of Secularization* (1978), a book which interrogates the varied pathways of secularization in different parts of the world. This, in turn, underpins the approach of Hans Joas, who distinguishes up to seven different meanings of the term 'secular' (Joas 2002; Joas and Wiegandt 2009). Such complexities must be squarely faced; it is in working through them that a better understanding of late-modern society will emerge, not in an exaggerated contrast between unitary, and thus distorting, understandings of secular and post-secular.<sup>xi</sup> Such thinking echoes very clearly the point made in my 1998 article. Many of the difficulties that have arisen in the sociology of religion have their roots in the notion that "one size fits all." It was all too often assumed that secularization was a necessary feature of modernization and that both processes would occur in the rest of the world as they have done in Europe. This is not the case—a shift accepted by increasing numbers of people, both in the academy and outside. The point to stress here is that approaches to the *post*-secular must be equally subtle and varied; it too must be understood in the context in which it occurs.

In 2007, I considered the agenda of the sociology of religion to be critical—in two senses. It was vital that we understood the place of religion in the 21st century and its continuing role in the lives of countless individuals and the societies of which they are part. I, however, was critical of a sub-discipline that did not always rise to this challenge. It is my firm belief that the sociology of religion—indeed the study of religion in general—is now in better shape. I welcome this shift unreservedly but remain sceptical about the motivations for much of the work being done. By and large, religion is still perceived as a problem—and in order to be better managed, it must be thoroughly researched.

Such a statement requires immediate qualification. It is more applicable in some places than in others, to some disciplines than to others, and to some researchers than to others. Broadly speaking the potential of religion to become a positive resource is most easily appreciated by those who know it best. Specifically, American scholars find it easier that their European equivalents and those who work in the developing world find it easier still—notably anthropologists and development workers. Right from the start, the former were less affected by the secular turn than their sociological cousins. The latter are practical people driven by the circumstances in which they find themselves—very often they work in places where religious networks are both more intact and more reliable than their secular equivalents. It seems, moreover, that researchers who "live" in the field (in whatever capacity and in whatever kind of society) are more likely to display a respect for their subjects and the lifestyles they embrace. Respect includes of course a critical perspective.

What next? Large numbers of researchers from many different disciplines are currently engaged in the study of religion, and much of their work is innovative and insightful. In itself, however, this success suggests a further step: the need to penetrate the philosophical *core* of the associated disciplines and to enquire what difference the serious study of religion might make to their ways of working. The size of the task should not be underestimated. Most of the disciplines in question have emerged more or less directly from the European Enlightenment, implying that they are underpinned by a markedly secular philosophy of social science. Interestingly it is precisely this point that Jürgen Habermas appreciates so clearly and addresses in his recent writing (Habermas 2006). He insists, moreover, that others have a similar responsibility: that is, to rethink the foundations of their respective fields of study in order to accommodate fully the implications of religion and religious issues in their analyses of modern societies. This, moreover, means accepting religion as it is, not as we

would like it to be. Above all, it must be driven by the data, not by the assumptions of overly secular social science.

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example, the introductory material contained in the first volume that appeared (Marty and Appleby 1991). In the end, five volumes were published in the original series; a further volume appeared in 2003, which drew on the material of the project as a whole (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, 2003).

<sup>ii</sup> The following quotation sums up Berger's argument: "The concern that must have led to this Project was based on an upside-down perception of the world, according to which 'fundamentalism' . . . is a rare, hard-to-explain thing. But a look either at history or at the contemporary world reveals that what is rare is not the phenomenon itself but knowledge of it. The difficult-to-understand phenomenon is not Iranian mullahs but American university professors—it might be worth a multi-million dollar project to try to explain that!" (Berger 1999: 2).

<sup>iii</sup> See <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/> for more details about the Religion and Society Programme itself and the very varied projects that contribute to this.

<sup>iv</sup> See [http://www.nfp58.ch/e\\_index.cfm](http://www.nfp58.ch/e_index.cfm) for more details.

<sup>v</sup> See <http://www.religionanddiversity.ca/> for more details.

<sup>vi</sup> Particularly interesting in this respect are the systematic attempts to document the religious situation in China. (See, for example, the work of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, IN, <http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/>.)

<sup>vii</sup> See [http://cordis.europa.eu/home\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/home_en.html) for details of the Framework Programmes.

<sup>viii</sup> See <http://www.ku.dk/priority/Religion/index.asp> for more details of the "Religion in the 21st century" Research Priority Area and the publications emerging from this.

<sup>ix</sup> See [http://www.crs.uu.se/Impact\\_of\\_religion/](http://www.crs.uu.se/Impact_of_religion/) for the content and structure of this Programme.

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<sup>x</sup> This case was widely reported in the press. See for example

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/faith/nurse-to-go-to-tribunal-in-row-over-cross-1929691.html>.

<sup>xi</sup> On this point, Hans Joas is sharply critical of Jürgen Habermas (see in particular Joas 2002).