

# Religion and contemporary sociological theories

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**abstract** In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the sociology of religion enjoyed a remarkable growth in both theory and empirical research. The scholarly consensus argues that the early secularization thesis associated with modernization theory was misleading and simplistic, or that it was primarily relevant to northern Europe. Beyond the European framework, there is ample evidence that religion plays a major role in society, culture and politics. With urbanization in the developing world, there has been increasing piety and religious revivalism. Religion will be a major factor in political and ideological struggles across the globe in this century. One negative aspect of this focus however has been over-concentration on radical Islam and other manifestations of religious violence.

**keywords** consumerism ♦ globalization ♦ materiality ♦ post-secularization ♦ public religions ♦ secularization ♦ spirituality

The importance of religion and the general scepticism about the secularization thesis has been accompanied by important theoretical developments. One important development has been the market or economic model of religion which stresses the supply rather than demand side of religion. However, it is not self-evident that the demand for religion is constant in time and space. The model, if it has any validity, appears to explain the vitality of religion in the American context where there is significant competition for religious services. Other developments include the post-secularization thesis of Jürgen Habermas which demands that secular and religious citizens engage in dialogue within the public sphere.

Criticism of the secularization thesis has seen increasing research emphasis on popular religion, spirituality and implicit religion. This research tradition has been characteristic of the sociology of religion in the United States and more recently in Europe where organized religion has been weak or declining. The result of contemporary research is that rigid conceptual dichotomies between religious and secular groups fail to capture the empirical diversity within these categories.

Other new areas have included the sociology of the body. This focus on embodiment is important because it is a corrective to the excessive concentration on religious belief and knowledge in much mainstream sociology of religion. Religion is not simply an assembly of beliefs and values, but obviously includes ritual practices, the use of material objects and respect for place.

Finally, there is increasing awareness of the limitations of western definitions of religion for comparative study and at the same time growing research endeavour to capture the nature and consequences of globalization for religious life. As a result the sociology of religion is a flourishing and diverse feature of modern scholarship.

## Introduction: classical sociology and its legacy

The study of religion played a major role in classical sociology from Karl Marx's theory of alienation and fetishism of commodities, to Max Weber's work on the Protestant sects and the rise of capitalism, to

William James's study of religious experience, to Émile Durkheim's work on the sacred and profane dichotomy and finally to Georg Simmel's view of religion as the creativity of life. This classical tradition was sustained in the sociology of Talcott Parsons, who refined the theory of secularization by noting the resilience of American denominationalism (Parsons, 1974). Large-scale comparative sociology of religion was taken up by his student Robert N Bellah (1957), for example in his *Tokugawa Religion*, which considered the evolution of this-worldly asceticism in Japan. This classical tradition continues to influence contemporary sociological theories of religion. One can illustrate this legacy by reference to two debates. The first issue, which preoccupied Durkheim, was the quest for a valid definition of religion that would permit sociological comparisons over time and space. Recent debates about spirituality, popular religion and official religion have kept alive issues that confronted both Weber and Durkheim. The second and related issue concerns the vexed issue about secularization, 're-sacralization' and 'public religions' and the question of 'American exceptionalism' (Torpey, 2010). Jürgen Habermas has more recently given a new turn to this ongoing debate in the notion of 'post-secular society'; namely a society in which both secular and religious citizens are obliged to give a public defence of their beliefs (Habermas, 2006).

Despite the scholarly depth of this legacy, the sociology of religion has had a chequered career. In mid-century it flourished in the United States but around a more narrow set of issues. The main issues were migration and denominationalism but the study of religion was no longer central to mainstream sociology. Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* described how religion had become part of American identity provided that identity fell under Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism. The other classic was Richard H Niebuhr's study of American denominationalism, which was designed to replace the church-sect typology of Ernst Troeltsch (1931). The revival of the sociology of religion as part of the core curriculum of the sociological discipline was associated with the work of Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, for whom the study of religion was an inseparable component of the sociology of knowledge in their *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). Berger went on to develop his own sophisticated version of secularization, arguing in *The Sacred Canopy* (Berger, 1967) that the plausibility structures behind religious belief were seriously compromised in modern societies. A similar line of argument emerged in Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* (1967). Contributions to the sociological theory of religion were made for example by Roland

Robertson (1970) in *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*. The mainstream sociological tradition in America has been to recognize that much of what we call 'religion' takes place outside the institutional framework of the churches and hence research has often looked at religion and youth culture, generational change and spirituality. This tradition can be illustrated by reference to the work of Wade C Roof, among which *A Generation of Seekers* (1993) and *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999). Alongside this research, there have been important contributions in qualitative ethnographic studies such as Courtney Bender's *Heaven's Kitchen* (2003) and *The New Metaphysicals* (2010).

In the United Kingdom, Bryan Wilson at the University of Oxford and David Martin at the London School of Economics dominated the study of secularization. Wilson (1966), noting the institutional decline of religion in northern Europe, argued that the Christian Churches survived in America at the cost of their theological contents; that is by subordinating their beliefs and practices to the logic of commercial culture. He also took the view that the inspirational religion of the Christian sects evolved over time into the conventional religion of the denominations. Perhaps the classic example of this process can be found in the history of Methodism. John Wesley (1703–1791), in developing his preaching circuits and establishing independent chapels, created a religious movement that had a strong appeal to the urban poor and the dispossessed. Wesley's field preaching was a challenge to the parish structure of Anglicanism and to the hierarchical authority of the local priesthood. At the same time Charles Wesley's hymns were popular alternatives to the formal worship of the Anglican liturgy. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Edward P Thompson (1963) examined Methodism as an oppositional, working-class and dissenting tradition, which by the middle of the nineteenth century had become a middle-class and mainstream denomination. The enthusiasm of the evangelical sects exposes them to a more rapid pathway towards denominational status. In these research contributions, Wilson's model of sectarian religion was highly influential (Wilson, 1967). Martin (1969) had taken a comparative perspective on secularization in his *The Religious and the Secular* and in recent years his work on global Pentecostalism has contributed to the criticisms of earlier theories of secularization in which secularism was treated as an inevitable companion of modernity (Martin, 2002).

Under the umbrella of the British Sociological Association, there have more recently been important contributions from James Beckford, Grace Davie and Linda Woodhead. These authors have also

expanded the framework of sociological research to look, for instance, at religious life inside prisons (Beckford and Gilliat, 1998). Another development in British sociology was around the idea of ‘implicit religion’ (Bailey, 1990). Recent work has also examined the important differences between religious life in the United Kingdom where the Church of England has been in long-term decline and the United States where religion in its various manifestations has been far more prominent in the public domain (Berger et al., 2008).

In France, where secularism or *laïcité* as the dominant tradition has been enforced by the state, the sociology of religion has not thrived. Major French sociologists (Raymond Aron, Raymond Boudon or Luc Boltanski) and French Marxists (Louis Althusser and Jean-Claude Passeron) have not made any significant contribution to the study of religion. The separation of church and state in France goes very deep into French culture. One illustration of the conflicts between secular republicanism and the Roman Catholic Church can be taken from the personal history of Althusser, who in the 1940s was both a member of the *Jeunesse de l’Eglise* and the Communist Party. The *Jeunesse de l’Eglise* supported the worker-priest movement and believed that communism and Christianity were compatible. When in July 1949 the Vatican excommunicated all Catholics who were members of the Communist Party, Althusser broke with orthodox Catholicism (Robbins, 2012: 46). Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most influential French sociologists, had only a limited interest in the sociology of religion (Rey, 2007). Bourdieu (1962) had studied Islam in his work on Algeria, but in his subsequent research religion played almost no part. While Luc Boltanski is profoundly concerned with moral issues, he too has paid scant attention to formal religion. The principal contemporary exception is the work of Daniele Hervieu-Leger (2000) in her notion of religion as a ‘chain of memory’ connecting generations across time.

More broadly, the revival of the sociology of religion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century was associated with growing recognition of the importance of religion in public life in terms of Solidarity in Poland, the Moral Majority in the United States, the vitality of charismatic churches and Pentecostalism in South America and Africa, the rise of Hindu nationalism and the revival of mainstream religions in Russia, China and Vietnam with the transformation of communist states in the 1990s. These developments were described as ‘public religions’ by José Casanova (1994). The idea that religion was only a matter of individual belief and practice, and that the church and state were separate in modern constitutions began to evaporate. With

growing awareness of the vitality of religion globally, sociologists such as Peter Berger (1999) began seriously to question the conventional assumptions about secularization.

What do I mean by ‘contemporary’ when referring to ‘sociological theories’? By contemporary we might mean, not just chronologically contemporary, but sociological theories that attempt to understand how modern societies have radically changed – for example as a result of the social impact of the Internet and cultural globalization – and how religion is changing as a consequence. Sociologists have grappled with religion on-line, new religious movements that promote self-care and empowerment, the globalization of religious traditions from Asia, the worldwide impact of Pentecostalism and so forth. These new approaches in the sociology of religion attempt to address both the ‘decentering and centering’ of religion in modernity (Cage et al., 2011). But how might we conceptualize the underlying social changes that are reshaping the world? One approach suggests that we have moved away from societies that are ‘sticky’ (placing high demands and costs on entry, membership and departure) to ones that are ‘elastic’ (in which the costs of membership and exit can be slight) (Elliott and Turner, 2012). An elastic society is one in which ‘seekers’ can explore and combine various religious traditions in the quest for an identity that will sit outside the formal structures of official religions.

## Political Islam

One significant change in the sociology of religion has been an eruption of interest in Islam, especially an interest in the Muslim communities of the West. While the development of the sociology of Islam is in part a response to the growth of the Muslim diaspora in the West, it is also regrettably a reaction to the West’s investment in security after 9/11 and bombings in London, Madrid and Bali. Consequently the study of Islam appears to be inevitably controversial, being associated with the spread of urban terrorism (Jurgensmeyer, 2003). The Twin Towers attack in New York in September 2002 not only changed the face of modern politics, it jettisoned the sociology of religion in radically new directions. George W Bush’s ‘war on terror’ reinforced ideas about ‘political Islam’ and ‘fundamentalism’ which came to dominate academic research. Of course the idea of a radical clash between Islam and the West started much earlier with the Gulf War of 1991, with the bombing of New York’s World Trade Center in March 1993 and the hijacking of an Air France plane in December 1994. Samuel

Huntington published his famous article on ‘The clash of civilizations’ in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 and Islam remained at the centre of debates about religion, democracy, nationalism and violence for two decades.

There is a considerable body of research on Islam looking at the debates about veiling and gender equality. This empirical research provides a detailed picture of Islam in Europe and North America where, despite public anxiety about multiculturalism and the place of Muslims in secular democracies, Muslim communities have been relatively successful in adjusting to life in the West (Cesari, 2010; Fetzer and Soper, 2005). The veiling of Muslim women was a political problem in Europe but not in the United States. By contrast, the debate about the *Shari’a* in America has emerged as a political and legal issue that is increasingly divisive, partly because it has become (unofficially) part of the agenda of the Republican Party and the Tea Party. Several states (Arizona and Oklahoma) have already pre-emptively banned references to the *Shari’a* in American courts. However the nature of the *Shari’a* as such is little understood. Debates about the *Shari’a* raise important problems about legal pluralism and equality, and even more problematic issues about rights to practise religion without excessive interference from the state.

Academic research has done much to demonstrate that the popular notion of an integrated global Islam is erroneous and that Islam is diverse and complex. Anthropological and sociological studies have also dispelled the widespread view that women are everywhere and always subordinated in Islam as second class citizens (Hafez, 2011; Joseph, 2000; Robinson, 2009). Despite the widespread presence of Islamophobia, research has also shown that there is no common pattern to the experience of Muslims as recent migrants to the United States, Europe and Australia.

After all this negative attention, the sociology of Islam has advanced conceptually and intellectually. Talal Asad’s *The Genealogies of Religion* (1993) and *Formations of the Secular* (2003) have been important in developing sophisticated approaches to Islam that do not concentrate on security issues. Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2005) has presented an alternative feminist view of the religious practices of women in Cairo. In summary, too much research on Islam is now either engulfed in political interests or is driven by overtly normative concerns. The sociology of Islam has made important contributions to our understanding of Muslim communities outside the terrorism framework (Keskin, 2011).

## Civil religion

Is modern society secular? Despite the academic enthusiasm for ‘desecularization’, there are strong arguments that suggest that religion in Europe has continued to decline and that religious growth in China and elsewhere is exaggerated (Bruce, 2002). Academic debate has continued to focus on the exceptional character of religion in America. The argument goes back to Alexis de Tocqueville’s great work of historical sociology on *Democracy in America* (1968) that was published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840. Religion operated for de Tocqueville in the form of the local and autonomous congregation, and the separation of religion and politics protected the emerging democracy from the control of an Established Church. He recognized the importance of churches as voluntary associations to American democratic institutions and values, but he also saw dangers in the excessive individualism of the early American frontier.

There is a wealth of research on the issue of American religion, both historical and sociological. Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010) argue in *American Grace* that religion has remained important in the public domain but Americans are no longer divided along denominational lines. Other authors have noted the strength and influence of Protestant evangelism and the success of the so-called ‘mega-churches’ (Thumma and Travis, 2007). But these studies do not answer the more problematic question about the actual character of religion in America. There is so to speak no doubt about the quantity of religion in America, but what about the quality?

It is often claimed that in a plural, diverse and multicultural society, social diversity could be contained under the broad umbrella of a ‘civil religion’. This notion had its origin in Rousseau’s political and educational theories. In the *Social Contract* of 1762 he argued that Christian belief in a supernatural world was inimical to social and political life on this earth (Rousseau, 1973). In ‘The creed of a priest of Savoy’ Rousseau (1956), rejecting the Christian view of the sinful nature of humankind, insisted that we need religion as a bulwark against existential despair. Deism gave full recognition to the emotions and the social role of religion in sustaining civil society. However, deistic religion was to be fabricated by a lawgiver operating in defence of a republic. During the French Revolution, Rousseau’s *Social Contract* was translated into the ‘administrative reality’ of the state, and provided intellectuals with a ‘new perspective of redemption through political power’ (Nisbet, 1990: 141). Robespierre in 1794 drew up the doctrine of the Religion of the Supreme Being, and the

idea of France as a singular and undivided state corresponded perfectly with the organization of the Terror, and with Rousseau's understanding of the submersion of the individual in the state.

The modern debate about religion in America is associated with Robert Bellah's famous *Daedalus* article (1967) on 'civil religion in America'. Against the notion of secularization, he argued that there is an American religious tradition that is separate from but connected to mainstream Christianity. This civil religion celebrated the historical sense of America as the First New Nation, the City on a Hill and the Israel of the New World. American history is one of sacrifice, tragedy and suffering but eventually of redemption. Starting with the Civil War, the tragedy extended to the war in Vietnam, and it contained symbols of national injury and deliverance. It was reinforced and revived by periodic festivals such as Thanksgiving and marked by the architecture of the Arlington Memorial. Bellah insisted that civil religion was not a second class or corrupted version of official Christianity, but it was the natural companion to a republican form of government. In a later version of the original argument, Bellah adopted a language that sounds in some respects like a version of Rousseau's republicanism. He concluded that 'a republic will have republican customs – public participation in the exercise of power, political equality of citizens, a wide distribution of small and medium property with few very rich or very poor – customs that will lead to a public spiritedness, a willingness of the citizen to sacrifice his own interests for the common good, in a word a citizen motivated by republican virtue' (Bellah, 1978: 18).

Bellah concluded his article on the legitimacy of the republic with recognition that consumerism and 'naked self interest' had undermined the institutions that are the vehicles of the civil religion. He asked, 'Have not the churches along with the schools and the family – what I have called the soft structures that deal primarily with human motivation – suffered more in the great upheavals through which our society has recently gone than any other of our institutions, suffered so much that their capacity to transmit patterns of conscience and ethical values has been seriously impaired?' (Bellah, 1978: 23). Bellah has perceptively argued that from George Washington to more recent American presidents there is an acknowledgement of God as the Supreme Being who stands over the nation, but in official discourse there is rarely any reference to Jesus Christ, precisely because in a multi-faith society any acknowledgement of Jesus as Saviour would be divisive. The idea that the nation is guided by a Supreme Being is in fact very close to Rousseau's idea that in a republic religion needs such a Being, but it does

not need the theological baggage of a religion of salvation.

## Secularization and the economic model

One of the dominant theoretical approaches to religion in contemporary sociology is the so-called 'economic model' of religion which was originally associated with Rodney Stark and William S Bainbridge in their *A Theory of Religion* (1987) and Stark and Finke's (2000) *Acts of Faith*. It has been variously described as the economic, the market and the rational choice model. Developed originally as a criticism of the secularization thesis, it was advanced to explain the vitality of religion in America. The work of Bainbridge, Stark, Warner and others emerged out of a desire to create a more comprehensive and effective general theory of religion in the social sciences. A key assumption of the theory is that the demand for religion is more or less constant, and therefore fluctuations in the level of religious activity are to be explained by variations in supply. Open religious markets in which religious groups or religious 'firms' are free to compete for followers or customers provide a more dynamic environment in which religious institutions can prosper. Competition produces a more diverse and attractive religious product and hence there is a more dynamic demand for religious services. The overall outcome is a religious economy that remains buoyant. By contrast, restricted markets in which there is a monopoly of supply with an established church or where the state seeks to regulate religion, are inefficient. Where there is regulation and restriction, there will be black or grey markets in which illegal or semi-legal groups attempt to provide religious 'products'. The more restricted the market, the more we can expect a sizeable grey market to evolve. The theory also assumes that individuals in restricted markets, for example in authoritarian societies where church and state cooperate to regulate supply, will face high costs, such as ostracism or imprisonment, in 'buying' and 'consuming' religious goods and services. The market model has given rise to much critical discussion (Lehmann, 2010). Perhaps the most successful criticisms of the approach have come from Steve Bruce (1999), who, among other objections, points to the success of religion in societies with an established church tradition at various points in their history such as Poland, Russia and Serbia.

The model has some obvious relevance when making comparisons between the restricted market in China and the free and competitive market in the United States. Whereas America has had, in the

absence of an established church, a robust religious market producing a diversity of providers of religious services, China is the classic example of the 'shortage economy of religion' (Yang, 2012: 123–58). In China the CCP, while still embracing radical atheism as its preferred ideology, set out to eliminate religion from Chinese society, and during the Cultural Revolution this atheist push against all forms of religion was further intensified. However following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Deng Xiaoping, admitting past policy mistakes towards religion, adopted a more pragmatic policy in 1982 in the famous Document No. 19. It recognized the social complexity of religion and the fact that in China especially religion is interwoven seamlessly with culture, ethnicity and national traditions. The new approach also allowed academic study of religion under the umbrella of cultural practices. While western observers have often seen this development as a momentous change in policy, Fenggang Yang (2012) in *Religion in China* draws attention to the fact that there are still significant restrictions remaining on the practice of religion, including activities that claim to be purely cultural. His economic or market model of Chinese religion provides important insights into contemporary developments and carefully analyses the contradictions and complexities of official policies in which continuing restrictions on religious practice inevitably fuel a large grey market of religious services.

The economic model does not provide much guidance as to the actual character of religion in China, because it is essentially an account of the efficiency of a religious market in quantitative terms. The model does not look at demand-side issues such as the meaning of religion to participants, because it takes demand as a constant. The economic model looks only at 'the process of exchange, not the nature of the religious "products"' (Yang, 2012: 21). The model does not attempt to distinguish between religious products and it does not attend systematically to the consequences of this religious revival for Chinese civil society.

## Religions of the Axial Age

There has been a more or less continuous debate about relevance of western or Abrahamic models of religion to Asian traditions. There is some general agreement among scholars that the idea of 'world religions' was a nineteenth-century invention and that 'Hinduism' for example was the product of British administrative needs. Contemporary sociology of religion has largely abandoned the historical and comparative approach to religion that was char-

acteristic of earlier scholarship. Here one may refer to Max Weber's comparative study of world religions, especially *The Religion of China* (1951) and *The Religion of India* (1958), or the work of Mircea Eliade or Benjamin Nelson, or Shmuel Eisenstadt (1986) on *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* or his work on *Japanese Civilization* (1996). Other comparisons might include reference to Arnaldo Momigliano's *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (1997). Perhaps the most striking recent example is Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), which combines evolutionary psychology and sociology to explore the religions of the Axial Age. Karl Jaspers' (1953) *The Origin and Goal of History* described a formative period before the Common Era in which religious prophets created universal ethical codes that shaped the rise of civilizations. In Jaspers' controversial analysis, the Axial Age was completed before the rise of Christianity and Islam, and hence the implication of the thesis is that they are merely variations on a theme that had already been established. This view contrasts sharply with recent interpretations of Pauline Christianity as the origin of modern ethical universalism. This debate about universalism often comes back therefore to the career and conversion of Saint Paul and his struggle with the Christian doctrine of grace and the relevance of the Jewish law. Two remarkable books have explored these issues at some length, namely Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul* (2003) and Jacob Taubes' *The Political Theology of Paul* (2004).

Bellah's magnum opus has many dimensions, but one persistent theme is the role of 'acosmistic world-denying love' in recognizing the humanity of every person regardless of their ethnicity, race and culture. Following Weber's distinction between asceticism and mysticism, Bellah presents a tragic view of religious history. He seeks to analyse the world religions as universalistic ethical systems that can break out of the narrow confines of family, kinship and locality. Religious universalism has to recognize that, for example, a disciple of Jesus must abandon family and kinship in order to devote themselves wholly to Jesus Christ as Lord. Kinship was fundamental to the religious traditions of China, where ancestor worship has been constitutive of Chinese traditions. These issues relating to kinship and ancestors provide a significant constraint on any universalistic impulse in Confucian values. In the case of Confucianism, Bellah does not adequately recognize the traditional role of filial piety as the basis of Confucian conservatism. By contrast, Weber was far more explicitly critical of the consequences of filial piety. He claimed that 'Confucianism placed a tremendous stress on familial piety, a stress which was motivated by belief in magic, in view of the importance of the family

spirits. This familial piety was cultivated in practice by a patriarchal and patrimonial-bureaucratic political organization' (Weber, 1978, Vol. 1: 579). It is primarily within congregational religions that co-religionists could replace kinfolk, because the notion of brotherly love could not breathe within the confines of an exclusive kinship network. Jaspers' legacy has given rise to a lively and productive debate (Bellah and Joas, 2012).

However, there is widespread scepticism about any claims to universality in the study of religion. In recent decades, the study of religions in Asia has flourished in Asian universities and research centres and this development has also underpinned the emergence of postcolonial studies, which have had the effect of 'provincializing Europe'. The outcome is that Asian scholars are developing independent traditions that better reflect local circumstances and histories. Sensitivity to these contextual and cultural concerns is well illustrated in Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (2005). These responses to the hegemonic status of western scholarship can be regarded as an outcome of Edward Said (1978) and the early criticisms of Orientalism. It may also be connected with the quest among historians to develop the idea of 'world history' that is neither parochial nor narrow. Perhaps the most important example is Marshal GS Hodgson (1993) in *Rethinking World History*.

## Popular religion

There has been much attention given to the idea of spirituality, which we can define simply as post-institutional, post-orthodox, individualized religiosity that is typically not connected to any congregational religion (Wood, 2010). It typically draws freely from various religious traditions, and can be regarded as a 'do-it-yourself religiosity'. While we might think that this development is an example of 'mysticism' from Troeltsch's typology of religion (Troeltsch, 1931), it is probably more accurate to think of spirituality under the umbrella of 'popular religion'. In his contribution to *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (Ricoeur and MacIntyre, 1969), Alasdair MacIntyre made the point that atheism is only a serious option in a society that has a dominant tradition of theism. A similar argument might be made about 'popular religion'. Taking popular religion seriously is probably only a real intellectual option in a society where influential theologians, powerful churches and a formal orthodoxy are still visible in the public domain. In short, the idea of something being 'popular' in religious terms implies that there is a hegemonic and comprehensive alternative to which the popular

manifestations of religious life are subordinated and typically oppositional. But in a modern society what is that alternative? To achieve some conceptual clarity, we may have to invent a contrast case to distinguish between the popular and its opposite. Of course, the churches play an important role in welfare provision and the Roman Catholic Church remains influential in education through schools and universities. Where there is an Established Church – such as the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom – organized religion enjoys certain benefits and privileges. One might conclude that in modern democratic societies all religions are popular.

While 'popular religion' was not an important topic in classical sociology, it has become a major issue in the contemporary sociology of religion. Wade Clark Roof has made an important contribution to the empirical study and theoretical understanding of the spirituality of so-called 'seekers' in the Baby Boomer generation such as *A Generation of Seekers* (1993) and *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999). These research findings suggest that the postwar generation in America flows in and out of different religious groups and traditions in search of meaning. Similar results have been reported in Europe by Grace Davie (1994), who coined the phrase that describes religious seeking as 'believing without belonging'. The study of popular religion has been an obvious area for qualitative ethnographic research and in this respect the research of Courtney Bender's *Heaven's Kitchen* (2003) has been exemplary.

Popular religions are enjoying a mushroom growth while the traditional churches are declining. The new generation of seekers find their inspiration in JRR Tolkien's mythological world, from science fiction and from *Star Wars*. They are also drawn to Satanism, witchcraft and neo-paganism. This ensemble has been referred to as 'hyper-real religions' (Possamai, 2012). These are worldwide developments, but are they socially or politically important? Whereas the prophetic religions of the Axial Age and the Protestant sects of the Reformation had a profound effect on culture and social structure, it is not self-evident that spirituality, which is by definition a somewhat private practice, will have any long-term significant consequences.

The analysis of popular religion has also typically taken notice of the various ways in which contemporary religious movements have been closely integrated into the global flow of modern commercialization of goods and services. Modern piety can therefore often be combined with commercial values and practices. Examples of this research with special reference to Asia include Pattana Kitiarsa's (2007) *Religious Commodification in Asia*, Vineeta Sinha's (2010) *Religion and Commodification* and Kajri Jain's (2006)

*Gods in the Bazaar*. These new developments also have important methodological and theoretical consequences. They suggest for example that sociology and anthropology should spend less time addressing religious beliefs and pay more attention to religious practices, places and objects. This development looks therefore towards the materiality of religion and is well illustrated by Julius Buatista's edited collection on *The Spirit of Things* (2012)

## Globalization

Another important development in the sociology of religion is concerned with globalization. Roland Robertson and William Garrett (Robertson, 1992; Robertson and Garrett, 1991) led the field in the study of religion and globalization, but academic interest has intensified in the last decade. The topic has received considerable theoretical attention from Peter Beyer (1994, 2006), but it is obviously more difficult to conduct empirical research on globalized religions than it is to conduct research within a local or national context. Unfortunately, much of the research on the globalization of religion has been conducted in relation to terrorism, security and political Islam. These topics can be seen as a continuation of Huntington's 'clash of civilizations', in which the future of political globalization will revolve around further conflicts over the sacred and political sovereignty. The growth of religious fundamentalism and revivalism has been an important if unanticipated aspect of cultural globalization. One consequence as we have seen it has been the disappearance of the secularization thesis. We have a research agenda in which globalization and the study of popular religion combine. Global, hybrid religiosity is a form of religious popular culture. In the United States, sociologists have identified the emergence of a 'quest culture' that attempts to find meaning in various and diverse traditions. The result is religious hybridity. New Age communities have been a popular topic of sociological research for some time (Heelas, 1996), but we need to understand more precisely how these spiritual marketplaces function globally and how are they connected electronically through the Internet. One can predict a growing sophistication in the use of Internet as a research technology in the immediate future.

## Conclusion: new trends and the future of the sociology of religion

There is now a widely held view that, after several decades of inactivity and marginalization, the sociology of religion has made a remarkable recovery. The academic consensus suggests that the secularization thesis was just wrong all along, or that it was primarily relevant to northern Europe. Beyond the European secular framework, there is ample evidence that religion plays a major role in society, culture and politics. In 2012 the National Intelligence Council in the United States published *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, in which it anticipates that religion will play a large role in state and international politics. Observing that urbanization in the developing world is associated with increases in piety, the report suggested that religion would be a major factor in political and ideological struggles across the globe.

The importance of religion and the general scepticism about the secularization thesis has been accompanied by important theoretical developments. One important contender in explaining the vitality of religion is the market or economic model of religion. It has certain obvious merits. It is parsimonious; it has a clear ambition to be a general theory; it explains certain phenomena effectively such as deregulation in China. However, it is not clear that there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the demand for religion is constant in time and space. Many object to the assumption that selling cornflakes has the same characteristics as selling religion. The model, if it has any validity, appears to fit the American context where there is significant competition but not other 'markets'. There has also been considerable interest in and research of the global commodification of religion in terms of, for example, religious tourism.

While the critical theory of the Frankfurt School had not paid any significant attention to religion, the situation has changed recently with Jürgen Habermas's promotion of the idea of post-secularism. His argument has however often been misunderstood. He is not saying that there has been a resurgence of religion, but merely that for a communicative dialogue to function both secular and religious spokespeople need to give rational, public accounts of their beliefs. This argument, while obviously justifiable, is not especially persuasive sociologically. Why would fundamentalists need to give an account of their position? The recent presidential election in the United States showed no evidence that religious fundamentalists in the Tea Party wanted to hold a dialogue with secular liberals in the Democratic Party or that anarchists in the Occupy



Wall Street movement had much sympathy with or need to communicate with religious conservatives (Gitlin, 2012).

Criticism of the secularization thesis has seen increasing research emphasis on popular religion, spirituality and implicit religion. This research tradition has been characteristic of the sociology of religion in the United States and more recently in Europe where organized religion has been weak or declining. While there is ample evidence of robust religious vitality, especially among youth, there is also evidence for example in the United States of more people declaring that they have no religion (Lin et al., 2010). Debates about the actual character of the secular have also led to interest in the study of atheism in modernity (Bullivant, 2012). The result is that rigid conceptual dichotomies between religious and secular groups and practices fail to capture the empirical diversity within these categories.

What are the new areas? Over the last two or three decades, the sociology of the body has grown to prominence and it has had some impact on the sociology of religion, primarily in the work of Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling (1997). Further aspects of this influence are evident in *The Routledge Handbook of Body Studies* (Turner, 2012). This focus on embodiment is important because it is a corrective to the excessive concentration on belief and knowledge in much mainstream sociology of religion. Religion is not simply an assembly of beliefs and values. Religion as belief has become dominant because survey techniques lend themselves to enquiries into attitudes and opinions. This development towards religion and embodiment is also a useful warning that much of our understanding of religion is in fact seen through the lens of Protestantism. For example, William James's influential approach to religious conversion in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1929) is wholly founded on the Protestant tradition. One can anticipate that the study of the body and body practice would offer a platform for further study of religion and emotions, religion and gender, and material religions. A development in this direction would be a foil to the over-concentration on violence, terrorism and Islam.

## Annotated further reading

In the last decade there have been a number of major handbooks and companions that provide a comprehensive overview of developments in the sociology of religion:

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 Clarke PB (ed.) (2009) *The Oxford Handbook of the*

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**résumé** Pendant le fin du XXème siècle et au début du XIème siècle, la sociologie de religion expérimentait un développement notable dans le domaine théorique ainsi que dans la recherche empirique. Le consensus érudit soutient que la thèse des débuts de sécularisation, qui est associée à la théorie de modernisation, était trompeuse et simpliste ou était principalement pertinent à l'Europe du Nord. Au dehors du cadre européen, il y a beaucoup d'évidence que la religion joue un rôle considérable dans la société, la culture et la politique. Parallèlement à cette urbanisation dans le monde en voie de développement, il y avait une augmentation de piété et de revivalisme religieux. Au siècle actuel, la religion sera un élément principal dans les luttes politiques et idéologiques sur Terre. Néanmoins, un aspect négatif de ce foyer est trop concentration sur l'Islam radical et des autres manifestations de violence religieux.

**mots-clés** consumérisme ♦ globalisation ♦ matérialité ♦ postsecularisation ♦ religions publiques ♦ sécularisation ♦ spiritualité

**resumen** Hacia finales del s. XX y comienzos del s. XXI, la sociología de la religión experimentó un notable crecimiento tanto a nivel teórico como empírico. El consenso académico sostiene que los inicios de la tesis de la secularización, asociados con la teoría de la modernización, eran engañosos y simplistas, o eran principalmente relevantes sólo para el norte de Europa. Más allá del marco europeo, existe una

amplia evidencia de que la religión juega un papel importante en la sociedad, la cultura y la política. Paralelo a la urbanización del mundo en vías de desarrollo, ha habido un crecimiento de la piedad y el evangelismo religioso. Durante este siglo, la religión será un elemento principal en las luchas políticas e ideológicas en el mundo. Sin embargo, un aspecto negativo de este enfoque ha sido la excesiva concentración en el Islam radical y otras manifestaciones de violencia religiosa.

**palabras clave** consumismo ♦ espiritualidad ♦ globalización ♦ materialidad ♦ post-secularización ♦ religiones públicas ♦ secularización