

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Challenging marginalisation

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Political religion: secularity and the study of religion in global civil society

John D'Arcy May

Introduction

The former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, himself a committed Christian, remarked in the late 1970s: “You can’t run a country by the Sermon on the Mount.” Yet, referring to the fraught situation in the Middle East, with its continual demonisation of the enemy and endless tit-for-tat killings, my German colleague Heinz-Günther Stobbe observed around the same time: “The Sermon on the Mount is the most realistic text in the New Testament.” The two comments neatly sum up the dilemma of religions in the public arena: the case could be made that their idealism, their promise of transforming society by transcending it, is indispensable to public morality and good government. Yet when such aspirations are turned into a programme, suspicions arise: in India the *dharma* is being proposed in the form of the Hindutva ideology as the only viable basis of the state, while some Muslims claim that only the implementation of the *Sharia* can establish a just polity. ‘Political religion’, then, is a term loaded with ambiguities: should religion be instrumentalised by politics, or should it be kept separate from the political sphere? Or alternatively, is it the case that religions of whatever type are constitutively political in their different ways, such that their political orientation will always come to light in the public sphere (May, 1999)? And if any of this is true, how can a social scientist study it?

We would therefore do well to be cautious about addressing the topic of ‘political religion’, whether in the context of Religious Studies, which some see as an illegitimate child of Christian theology, or International Relations, which might be characterised as extending the study of the political institutions of nation states to include the relations between states themselves. The inherited presupposition of both disciplines is that the secularisation and consequent privatisation of religion are fundamental to modernity, that any deviation from this canonical view represents a threat to the normative principles of liberal democracies, and that the politicisation of religion, its re-entry into civil society as a public actor, is some kind of distortion or anomaly whose study can safely be left to those whose interests run to social deviation and sectarianism.¹

This is ironic, because the great political thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Locke, Rousseau and de Tocqueville, although they approved of the separation of church and state, did so in the name of religious toleration, for they believed that religious liberty and political liberty were allies, not adversaries, and that underlying what Rousseau called 'civil religion' was not only a 'natural religion' but a properly theological issue of human wholeness and moral conscience (Reynolds and Durham, 1996; Fiala, 2005).

Because of the Westphalian presumption, 'virtue-ethics' are contrary to the approach of Western governments and development agencies, which argue that 'religion' gets in the way of helping the poor or promoting development. What has to be remembered is that there is a close relationship between religious freedom and political freedom, and religious toleration often has been the beginning of political toleration, civil society, and democracy. (Thomas, 2003, pp 45-6)

It is this ambivalence of the linkage between politics and religion that leads me to address the problems raised for the study of religion in the highly politicised context of globalisation. To make secularity the presupposition of the 'scientific' study of religion is to overlook the fact that secularisation is itself a religious phenomenon, as the 'founding fathers' of the social sciences were well aware. The historical process of 'secularisation' in its literal sense – the forced reduction of sacred people and objects (monks and nuns, monasteries and convents, rulers and their bureaucracies) to the 'lay state' – at one and the same time posited and destroyed the dualism of sacred and secular. Fundamental to this process was the separation of church and state in Europe, which liberated not only the arts and sciences but also citizens and their consciences from ecclesiastical control. What was lost in this process was the complementarity of sacred and secular, the awareness that the one does not make sense without the other and that their duality does not make sense outside its Western European context of origin. Take away the secular, and the sacred uses its claim on absolute truth to monopolise power; but take away the sacred, and the secular withers because it is cut off from its sources of moral strength and imagination. The sacred means this world functioning as a mediator of transcendence; the secular implies that this same world is autonomous and sufficient unto itself (Loy, 2004, pp 27-8).

What may be misleading about this discussion of an enervated sacral dimension is that it still seems to suggest *superimposing* something (for example, some particular religious understanding of the meaning of our lives) onto the secular world (that is, the world 'as it really is'). My point is the opposite: our usual understanding of the secular is a *deficient* worldview (in Buddhist terms, a delusion) distorted by the fact that one half of the original duality has gone missing, although

now it has been absent so long that we have largely forgotten about it. (Loy, 2004, p 28; emphasis in original)

The problems involved in taking for granted that secularity is an indispensable precondition for both the study of religion and the conduct of international affairs should by now be apparent. This chapter sets out to investigate in what sense religion can legitimately be political, to consider the implications of this for International Relations, and to ask whether the coming global civil society will in fact be secular in the same sense as its nation state predecessors, adverting throughout to the consequences of our reflections for Religious Studies.

The pitfalls of trying to yoke ‘political’ to ‘religion’

In Indigenous societies such as those of Melanesia there is no real distinction between economic, political and ‘religious’ activity; it may also legitimately be asked what sense the concept of secularisation makes in civilisations such as the Chinese and Japanese, in which religion was always a this-worldly affair and continues to be so under conditions of rapid and thoroughgoing industrialisation and technological innovation. Where more other-worldly religions such as the great monotheisms have aspired to rise above politics and purify themselves of secular concerns, they have generally failed, even where they have striven to convince themselves otherwise. In its attempts not to be, religion usually finishes up being political; religions that have voluntarily withdrawn from the public arena, such as the Anabaptists of the left-wing Reformation and many varieties of contemporary fundamentalism, whether Christian or Islamic, as well as those which have tried to dominate it, such as the Roman Catholic church at certain stages in its history and Islam from the very beginning of its, have become political actors in so doing. Religions may choose to shun the public arena because they cannot dominate it or because it defines them in a way with which they disagree, but these are *public* acts by *social* actors in a *political* forum, in much the same way as the mere mutual awareness of two or more conscious subjects already constitutes communication; even if the people in question wish to avoid communicating explicitly, it is this that they are communicating! In Martin E. Marty’s laconic formulation: ‘Not to decide about religion in public life is to decide’ (Marty, 2005, p 162).

There is considerable tension today between religious beliefs and practices forged in cultural settings such as ancient India and Palestine or medieval Europe and Arabia and their status in pluralist – which is taken to mean *ipso facto* secular – societies, not to mention the emerging global public sphere. One of the taken-for-granted orthodoxies of modernity is the ‘privatisation’ of religion once ‘secularliberal democracy’ has been established. The secularisation of society itself, we are told, inevitably decouples religion from politics and makes it a matter of personal preference and interior conviction. In this (now classical) ‘liberal’ view of society, religion has no business in the public sphere. Reason is public, but not

religion; scientific theories and the evidence for them, like political decisions and the interests they represent, are properly matters of public debate, but not religious rituals and their mythological rationales, because there is no agreed medium in which they can be expressed apart from that imposed on them from without by secular reason. In the new public space created by globalisation and the 'real virtuality' (Castells, 1996, pp 410-18; May, 2003, 2005) of electronic communications media, it is not so much the *privatisation* (retreat into interiority) of religious convictions as the *individualisation* (isolation in autonomy) of the culturally uprooted and disorientated that is making possible the new universalisms of the 'next Christendom' (Jenkins, 2002) or the 'virtual *ummah*' (Roy, 2004): cut off from ties to community and place by social mobility or emigration, individuals absorb the shock of individualisation by identifying with idealised, ahistorical versions of all-encompassing religious world-views such as those of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The obverse of this globalisation of the religious is the consolidation of localised groups of true believers who demand space in the public sphere to be exclusively themselves.

It is at this point that the question of how to study religions in global public space becomes interesting. The founders of *Religionswissenschaft* took their scientific stand on comparativism and phenomenological method, a heritage which is indeed foundational for the discipline of Religious Studies, but in the context defined by orientalism and post-colonial theory this is increasingly regarded as a Western perspective which prematurely universalises 'religion' and approaches the religions as Christianity's 'religious others' (King, 1999; Masuzawa, 2005). The reluctance of the social sciences, including both International Relations and Religious Studies, to react to the global resurgence of religion exposes flaws in social science methodology that are becoming intellectually counterproductive and are stifling the contributions the study of religions could make to world peace. In such a context, 'political religion' becomes not only a proper but also an urgent topic for Religious Studies.

The more unambiguously 'religious' the religions are, the greater their potential to become political factors: this is my first proposition. If it can be substantiated, another follows: the complicity of Religious Studies in the ideology of neutrality towards its subject matter may have to be revised, for under these auspices there is a danger that students of religion will miss the very elements that make religions 'religious' and *consequently* 'political'. The stance of strict abstention from judgements of truth about religions is itself part of a practical-political programme stemming from the Enlightenment with its differentiation of science and art, politics and economics as autonomous spheres emancipated from religious control; in other words, 'secularised' (Casanova, 1994, p 214). This emancipation was the indispensable presupposition of modernity, and wherever it occurs there is tension with the religious traditions that previously presided over these spheres (although in East Asia, as we have seen, one may ask whether it ever made sense to speak of secularisation in this way). The proper place of religions in specifically 'modern' societies and their polities is to remain outside

the public sphere in which rationality obtains, and hence beyond the possibility of political intervention.

The fascinating aspect of the new developments is that religions, in their fundamentalist and neofundamentalist forms, are eagerly placing *themselves* in this extra-social, a-political, de-culturated position. There is a sense in which anyone who expresses a firm conviction in public these days is liable to be labelled a fundamentalist; but it is also the case that there are fundamentalist movements that are well aware of their own political impact, thereby making calculated use of the secularisation of societies: the rise of *Hindutva* in secular India, the influence of the New Christian Right on neoconservative politics in the US and the tensions generated by radical Islamists in Europe are cases in point. The *study* of religions, at least as it is still institutionalised in most of our universities, continues to restrict itself to the intrinsic interest of the religions as historical and social phenomena, bracketing out any implications they might have for personal religious commitment or the public role of religion. Hence my question: is this a sufficient rationale for the study of religions in a world where the religions have once again become both political actors and personal identity markers on a global scale? Some scholars of religion are calling for the deployment of the resources of the religions themselves in the study of religion, in much the same way as heavily camouflaged Protestant Christian assumptions used to define the parameters of Religious Studies (Cabezón and Davaney, 2004; Cabezón, 2006).

The term 'political', too, deserves a moment's reflection. Politics is problem solving, not the application of ready-made theories to practice, which facilitates the creation of ideologies. This can become a significant temptation for religions, but ideology tends to politicise and instrumentalise and ultimately to falsify religions, even when they vehemently reject any such politicisation. The situation in Northern Ireland, of course, is a veritable laboratory for the study of such instrumentalisation (May, 1995). Hasenclever and Rittberger (2003, p 113) state that 'the causal pathway is unambiguous: The politicisation of religions leads to the escalation of given disputes and never to their de-escalation', and Lausten and Waever (2003, pp 165-6) are even more unequivocal: '*Religion plus securitization equals ideology*', but '*Ideology is quasi-religion, not religion per se*' (emphasis in original). In this framework, then, my reflections are not purely disinterested but try to envisage a future in which the study of religion will become more 'engaged' while preserving its 'scientific' integrity.

The 'Westphalian presumption' and the 'return of religion' in International Relations

It is said that within days of 11 September 2001 copies of the Qur'an were sold out across the US. The fact that 'they' attacked 'us' is not the purest of motives for a renewed interest in the world's religions, but there is no denying that the radicalisation of militant Islam has shaken many in the West out of their complacent assumption that the religions are the politically irrelevant expression

of private convictions. Islam's emotional hold over its adherents and the sheer spiritual power it is capable of mobilising worldwide can be exaggerated (Roy, 1995, 2004), but the realisation that religion, *as* religion, can be a power factor has accelerated the revision already under way of the theories of 'secularisation' that dominated the social sciences for more than a generation (Wuthnow, 1992; Berger, 1999). It is becoming apparent that secularisation can affect different aspects of society and its political and administrative structures in different ways: it can mean the differentiation of autonomous spheres such as science and politics from religious tutelage, thus rendering them 'secular'; the decline of religious belief and practice, as can be observed particularly in Europe; and the marginalisation of religion by confining it to the private sphere (Casanova, 1994, p 211). These can occur either separately or together in various combinations. Secularisation is thus contextual, involving quite different dynamics in different historical and cultural situations. This discussion involves us immediately in a reassessment of certain aspects of the Enlightenment and their normative status for education and culture in the West.

Once the signatories of the Peace of Westphalia had conceded that the church was no longer coincident with society, as it had been in the form of 'Christendom' throughout the Middle Ages, and that the now divided Christian churches could enter into various political allegiances without thereby necessarily providing grounds for conflict (*cuius regio, eius religio*, loosely translated as 'the religion of the subject shall conform to the religion of the ruler'), the churches had unwittingly started down the road that was to see them become mere 'denominations' in secular pluralist states, and the states themselves had just as unwittingly set the stage for an international order of competing ideologies, in which at least some nation states are organised as societies that explicitly recognise ideological pluralism. The outcome of both processes was that 'the religious sphere became just another sphere' (Casanova, 1994, p 21) in the ideologically neutral public forum in which world-views interact and compete. Precisely this is now happening to Islam as it makes the painful passage from its cultural homelands to the multicultural societies of the West. The social sciences, whose foundational theorists such as Weber, Durkheim and Troeltsch wrestled with the relationship between religion and society, eventually took it as axiomatic that the privatisation of religion – in other words, secularisation – is the inevitable outcome of processes of modernisation and industrialisation and the indispensable presupposition of pluralist democracies and the rational conduct of public affairs; even Thomas Luckmann's 'invisible religion' and Niklas Luhmann's redefinition of it as a 'contingency formula' make this assumption (Casanova, 1994, p 35). As these processes proceed apace under the aegis of global economism, something like the universal 'end of religion' should be the result.

But it is now becoming apparent that in many contemporary situations – we may think of liberation theology in Latin America, Black consciousness in South Africa or engaged Buddhism in Southeast Asia – religion has made the transition from being a 'dependent' to an 'independent' variable (Gill, 1975, 1977). Large

numbers of people can be simultaneously both secular and religious; in other words, *the privatisation of religion is not normative* as either the presupposition or the outcome of processes of industrialisation and democratisation (Casanova, 1994, pp 38-9), and religions, even those that repudiate culture and politics, are paradoxically becoming cultural and political factors in their own right. The salient point is that, in the case of religion, *both privatisation and deprivatisation can be voluntary*. There may then be 'legitimate forms of "public" religion in the modern world' which can *both* offer rationally grounded criticism of public policy while *also* allowing 'for the privatization of religion and for the pluralism of subjective religious beliefs':

In order to be able to conceptualize such possibilities the theory of secularization will need to reconsider three of its particular historically based – that is, ethnocentric – prejudices: its bias for Protestant subjective forms of religion, its bias for "liberal" conceptions of politics and of the "public sphere", and its bias for the sovereign nation-state as the systematic unit of analysis. (Casanova, 1994, p 39)

Far from remaining corralled in the private sphere to which the theorists of modernity had confined it, religion has insisted on 'going public', making more and varied use of the space opened up by 'civil society' as an alternative either to co-opting the state or taking refuge in the privacy of face-to-face relationships. Hence,

... religion and politics keep forming all kinds of symbiotic relations, to such an extent that it is not easy to ascertain whether one is witnessing political movements which don religious garb or religious movements which assume political forms. (Casanova, 1994, p 41)

We are thus confronted with 'attempt[s] to indigenize modernity rather than to modernize traditional societies' (Thomas, 2003, p 22). The distinction between private and public spheres is being continually redefined by the religions themselves at all levels of society, from the family to the state, but most especially as actors in the 'open space' of civil society – even where they vehemently reject it. Religion may be 'political' even though it does not determine forms of government; the separation of church and state, or of the purely religious from the merely political, does not necessarily entail either the privatisation of religion or the secularisation of societies. All this holds good, however, under the one precondition, which is Enlightenment's greatest legacy to modernity and which religions from traditional Catholicism to contemporary Islam have found hardest to accept: the state's right and duty to protect the individual's freedom of conscience *from* religion, for

... from the normative perspective of modernity, religion may enter the public sphere and assume a public form only if it accepts the

inviolable right to privacy and the sanctity of the principle of freedom of conscience. (Casanova, 1994, p 57)

In short, one could say that the publicness of religion sets up a dialectic of relationships between power, freedom and truth which generates tensions and sometimes open conflict between the religious community as such, its institutionalised form in the larger society and the beliefs and practices of its individual members.

In the light of this discussion, I suggest that neither Religious Studies nor International Relations is at present adequately equipped to disentangle the complex relationships between religion and politics. There has been much progress in creating an enhanced awareness of the interaction between researcher and subjects in anthropology and, since the work of the 'ethnomethodologists' in 'constructivist' sociology and political science (McSweeney, 1999, chs 6, 8), but each discipline has characteristic inhibitions when confronted with 'theology', or its equivalents in non-theistic religious traditions. By this I mean the intellectual labour of self-interpretation, the hermeneutic immanent within each identifiable tradition by which it continually explains itself to itself, thereby maintaining the continuity of its identity from generation to generation. Such activity, especially when it is the immediate inspiration of attempts to become active in the public sphere, is instinctively regarded by the liberal consensus as illegitimate because non-rational and therefore non-viable in the public forum. Whatever else it is, Religious Studies must be 'not-theology' and must never admit to any kind of normative presuppositions (Griffiths, 2006). The 'politics of religious studies' thus becomes a sub-species of 'political religion' (Wiebe, 1999, ch 10).

Towards an 'engaged' study of religions in global civil society

I suspect that the sense of 'political religion' I am striving to elucidate is just as intellectually unwelcome in Religious Studies as it is in International Relations, although attitudes are changing. On the side of Religious Studies, the sterile debate which pits 'theology' and other confessional commitments against the 'scientific' study of religions is gradually being overcome (see the many-sided debate in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol 74, 2006 and also May 2004), and on the side of International Relations the 'return' of cultural identity and religious commitment to the purview of international politics is belatedly being proclaimed (Johnston and Sampson, 1994; Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996; Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003). This welcome conjuncture urgently needs further intensive study from both sides, however. Religious Studies, as an aspiring social science, is most comfortable with the study of religions as phenomena, or, as we might say today, 'data' – institutions, symbolic structures, behaviour – as abstracted from the evidence of religious actors. In the eyes of some, this involves rigorous generalisation from a standpoint that is *not* that of those being studied ('the natives *don't* know best').² Even in cases of self-reflective participant observation and

empathetic description researchers are faced with the problem of whether or not to accept as 'true' the meanings and intentions that religious actors themselves attribute to their actions. It is intentional actions that create the precondition for truth by their implicit requirement that such actions be meaningful and that their meanings be discernible and, if need be, defensible, so that actions can be approved of as 'right' because they conform to what is taken to be 'true'. If language is the continuation of action by other means (Hörmann, 1978), then it is meaningful actions themselves – that is, behaviours *and* the meanings attributed to them by actors – that are the basic units of the study of religions.

It is precisely these implicit meanings that are made explicit and 'objectified' when exposed to the pluralism of the – now global, but not necessarily secular – public sphere, thus initiating a crisis of meaning for many religious traditions. As Mary Douglas insisted, all meanings are social meanings, and 'the known cosmos is constructed for helping arguments of a practical kind' (Douglas, 1975, p xix; see pp 5, 8, 75, 122). But for many religious people it is an unfamiliar spectacle to see their cherished convictions become the premises of practical-political arguments with others whose interests and convictions differ radically from their own. Such conflicts are no longer restricted to the controlled environments of 'secular' democracies, but are global in scope, as recent attempts to enforce *laïcité* in France and Turkey and Pope Benedict XVI's unfortunate remarks on Islam in his Regensburg address illustrate. In such circumstances, it is undoubtedly advantageous for the social scientist to maintain an intellectual distance between their viewpoint as researcher and the truth claims being advanced by subjects. This need not entail that the student of religion must adopt an exclusively 'outsider' perspective, but one way or another they too have a viewpoint, one that can engage with that of the 'insiders' (McCutcheon, 1998). Perhaps it is the dawning realisation of this that is leading some scholars of religion with religious commitments to 'come out' and declare themselves 'religious' (see Cabezón and Davaney, 2004; Cabezón, 2006, pp 32-3). It could be argued that it is only by adopting the 'insider' perspective of those whose views of the world are at issue – by 'becoming' in some real sense what we study – that we are able fully to understand.

Conclusion

Materialist, positivist and otherwise reductionist rationales for the study of religions are not the antidote to ideology but are themselves ideological; this much is becoming clear. It is equally clear that religious faith itself, and not just its rationalisations in various 'theologies', can perform ideological functions. This is a challenge to both Religious Studies and International Relations. Neither discipline is comfortable when exposed to commitments, but it is commitments that make actions moral, and one step further back it is religious commitments that at the very least provide contexts of origin – and as a rule contexts of validity as well – for moral conviction. Ethics, although logically autonomous, is pragmatically in

need of motivation and ideationally in need of 'plausibility structures', which the religions have historically provided – albeit sometimes by dubious means – and continue to provide. This is not to recommend a 'religious' study of religions, simply to note that students of religion are deceiving themselves if they think they can ignore 'theology', understood as the religions' own critical reflection on their practice and experience. In today's multireligious context, this involves entering into *interreligious* relationships as the religions experience them, thereby gaining access to their crises of self-understanding and their attempts to accommodate otherness within the constraints of their own ongoing efforts at self-definition. As Cabezón puts it, the Other may be problematic 'when he is TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US, or when he claims to BE-US', but 'it is equally true that the Other becomes problematic when *we* claim to BE-THEM' (Cabezón, 2006, p 33; capitals as in original). These are ethical questions, implicit in the very notion of dialogue, and they cannot be solved in the abstract, from outside, but only in a practical engagement with otherness as it touches truth – 'their' truth, but ours as well in as much as we allow our religiosity – and secularity – to engage with theirs. There is a problem-solving, conflict-resolving and peace-building potential implicit in the very fact of interreligious relations.

The alternatives are sobering. For the religions, if they fail to rise to the challenge of global pluralism and constructive interrelatedness, there is the bleak prospect of a plethora of rigid fundamentalisms, incapable of accommodating otherness and unable to enter the public sphere except to reinforce their obsessions and do battle with all who differ from them. For International Relations, the consequences would be even more disastrous than they are proving to be at present. For Religious Studies, the ultimate outcome of a sterile 'science envy' would be a steady loss of plausibility and legitimacy, ending in irrelevance and confirming Paul Griffiths' pessimistic forecast: 'This [assumption] makes the future of the nontheological academic study of religion just what it should be: bleak' (Griffiths, 2006, p 74). The admittedly large claim being made is that the empathetic study of religions in their interrelationships can make a political contribution to warding off the threat of fundamentalism while providing International Relations as a *praxis* with some purchase in its attempts to establish the bases of civilised behaviour in the global public forum. A negative outcome is not inevitable if Religious Studies, short of becoming somebody's particular 'theology' but also without succumbing to a dis- and uninterested scientism, can renew itself by coming to grips with the ethical and political challenges the religions must now meet in the emerging global civil society. As Richard Falk states:

It is my contention that this effort to construct a democratic global civil society is informed by religious and spiritual inspiration, and if it is to move from the margins of political reality and challenge entrenched constellations of power in a more effective way, it will have to acquire some of the characteristics and concerns of a religious movement,

including building positive connections with the emancipatory aspects of the great world religions. (Falk, 2003, p 193)

The religions can confront politicians and the powerful, nationally but now also internationally in the inchoate global order, with serious questions about the normative presuppositions of their policies. Declarations of war, ecological destruction, economic imbalance, the wanton elimination of languages and cultures – all these and many other evils of globalisation may no longer be rationalised with spurious ‘liberal’ justifications (freedom of choice, economic growth, competition). When asserting the dignity of the human, the inviolability of nature and the common good, the religions – at their best – are bringing to bear on these problems historically rooted and communally tested value orientations. What might be termed their ‘future nostalgia’ – what Christian theology calls their eschatological vision – makes the religions factors to be reckoned with as the new global order of civil society takes shape. Both Religious Studies and International Relations – preferably in an explicit intellectual exchange – would be reinvigorated if this were recognised and integrated into their methodologies. Can social scientists rise to this challenge while preserving the integrity of our disciplines? This is not a soft option for idealists, but a hard intellectual and political task, and the way we go about it, I am convinced, will determine the future credibility – and fundability – of our disciplines.

Notes

¹ In International Relations, this is known as the ‘Westphalian presumption’; see Petito and Hatzopoulos (2003).

² The most uncompromising proponent of this view is Segal (1992, 2006), and see the review of McCutcheon (2003) by Albinus (2006).

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Australia's 'shy' de-secularisation process

Adam Possamai

Introduction

In many parts of the world religion has re-entered the public sphere to such an extent that it has undermined the 'hard line' secularisation thesis – that is, the assumption that religion would disappear in Western, modernised societies. Since this 'hard line' view should not be happening, views on secularisation have had to be revised. Some academics (for example, Bruce 2002, 2006; Norris and Inglehart, 2004) explain that secularisation is still happening but in a much less extreme process than first predicted, while others (for example, Richardson, 1985; Hadden, 1987; Brown, 1992; Warner, 1993; Kepel, 1994) propose that there is a reverse process and that secularisation is losing momentum. In accordance with this latter view, recent theories in the sociology of religion (see, for example, Martin, 2005; Casanova, 2006; Davie, 2006) have pushed the debate further by applying Eisenstadt's (2000) multiple modernities paradigm.

To illustrate this paradigm, I am using Martin's (2005) recent work on the matter in which he employs Casanova's definition of secularisation on social differentiation, 'meaning by that the increasing autonomy of the various spheres of human activity' (Martin, 2005, p 123). Religion is no longer an overarching system and is now seen as a sub-system of society alongside other sub-systems (for example, education, health, commercial, scientific institutions) such that all-encompassing claims of religion have much less relevance. Religion no longer has the place it had in societal structure and is no longer the dominant voice when it comes, for example, to politics, welfare and education. If religion is still strong in our culture, it is not the yesteryear pillar of Western social structure. Moving beyond this *fait accompli*, Martin's work pushes further our understanding of this process by underlining the different dynamics of secularisation, rather than simply assuming a single one as in many previous sociological studies. The fundamental argument of his latest work is that secularisation is not a clear-cut process that happens in all Western societies homogeneously or that will happen to all industrialising countries. Indeed, as the author argues in relation to Christianity:

... instead of regarding secularization as a once-for-all unilateral process, one might rather think in terms of successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils. Each Christianization is a salient of faith driven into the secular from a different angle, each pays a characteristic cost which affects the character of the recoil, and each undergoes a partial collapse.... (Martin, 2005, p 3)

Following this multilateral view of the process of secularisation, the reader is asked to observe that this process is not only different between North America and Europe, but is also distinctive within each region of these cultural areas. There is not one secular ending to Western history but rather various phases of secularisation and sanctification.

Martin's articulation of 'multiple secularisations' aligns itself with the very recent concept of 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt, 2000). For Eisenstadt (2000, p 2):

The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world – indeed to explain the history of modernity – is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs. These ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity, holding very different views of what makes societies modern.

The main point of the multiple modernities thesis is that the modernities outside of the Western world cannot fully be understood with the same categories and concepts used to understand Western modernities. Indeed, following this Western imposition on social transformations and ideals, Martin reminds us how the concept of 'secularisation' became an 'ideological and philosophical imposition on history rather than an inference from history' (2005, p 19). One can also remember Martin's (1995) earlier work considering the studies of Durkheim and Weber on the crisis of religious consciousness in modernity, which were so strong that secularisation became the undisputed paradigm among sociologists and thus was not regarded as deserving much study after the First World War. By understanding secularisation as a multilateral process, a type of 'multiple secularisations' thesis, Martin gives to researchers of religion a strong way out from this ideological imposition.

Even more recently, Casanova (2006) and Davie (2006) used this theory to differentiate the European case from that of the US. For many years, sociologists analysed the secularisation process in Europe believing that the rest of the world, when modernised, would follow this trend. The US, where religion is stronger in terms of church attendance and political activism, was seen as the exception to the secularisation rule. Now, with recent data, these authors have come to the

conclusion that religion is thriving around the world (including countries that are modernised but not European or that are in the process of modernisation). This has led them to reverse the perspective and to view Europe as the exception. The contrast between the European and US case can provide an answer to this difference:

Crucial is the question of why individuals in Europe, once they lose faith in their national churches, do not bother to look for alternative salvation religions. In a certain sense, the answer lies in the fact that Europeans continue to be implicit members of their national churches, even after explicitly abandoning them. The national churches remain there as a public good to which they have rightful access when it comes time to celebrate the transcendent rites of passages, birth, and death. It is this peculiar situation that explains the lack of demand and the absence of a truly competitive religious market in Europe. In contrast ... the United States never had a national church. Eventually, all religions in America, churches as well as sects, irrespective of their origins, doctrinal claims, and ecclesiastical identities, turned into "denominations", formally equal under the constitution and competing in a relatively free, pluralistic, and voluntaristic religious market. As the organizational form and principle of such a religious system, denominationalism constitutes the great American invention. (Casanova, 2006, p 16)

Needless to say, both Europe and the US have gone through a modernisation process that has differently affected their (de-)secularisation process. Earlier in her work, Davie (2002) put Europe and the US on the extreme of a continuum. At one point, she equated the European case with that of state or elite control of religion (in which there is a culture of obligation, for example going to church because one has to) and the US case with that of religious voluntarism (in which there is a culture of consumption or choice, for example I go to church because I want to as long as it provides what I need during a period of time I want to invest). In between she places Australia and Canada as hybrid cases.

Australia might have a specific modernity and a specific process of secularisation and de-secularisation. This chapter argues that there is an increased decentralisation, pluralism and voluntarism of religious life within Australia's specific modernity; and that these are not signs of religion's demise but of its vitality. It is the working assumption of this chapter that this phenomenon adds to Australia's diversity (Bouma, 2006) and the enrichment of its civil society (Ireland, 1999). After exploring Australian religious characteristics, I will then attempt to pinpoint Australia's specific de-secularisation process.

Australia's religious characteristics

Australia, this former English penal colony where the Anglican religion was first used as a tool for social control despite claims of a separation of church and state, saw its religious homogeneity changing after the Second World War as postwar migration and conversion to new religious movements transformed the cultural, religious and ethnic profile of Australian society. In 1947, Anglicans represented 39% of the population. In 2006, they dropped to 18.7% and are no longer the largest religious group in Australia. Catholics, on the other hand, thanks to migration movements, have become the largest group, with 25.8% of the population in the same year. What is also worth noting is that Australia is becoming less and less a Christian country, from 88% of the population in 1947 to 64% in 2006. It is also worth mentioning that attendance at mainstream churches is also in decline, from 20% of the population attending at least once a month in 1998 to 18.6% in 2002 (Bellamy and Castle, 2004). Without going into much detail, on the other hand, non-mainstream Christian groups such as the Pentecostals and non-Christian groups are growing in Australia. In the 'other' census category that includes groups such as Baha'i, Japanese religions, Scientology and Witchcraft, there was an increase of 33% between 1996 and 2001. In the same time frame, Buddhism increased by 79%, Hinduism by 42% and Islam by 40% (Bouma, 2006). These changes occurred behind the back of public and secular group notice from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. The secular Australian government, while managing migrant intake,¹ always believed that when religious migrants came to Australia, they would simply see the 'light' of Australian secular society and slowly convert to the 'No religion' category. The secular government never thought that these migrant groups would add so much to the Australian religious landscape (Bouma, 2006).

To be fair with this debate, it is important to mention that the 'No religion' category, although it has decreased by 1.5% since 1996, has grown from 6.7% of the population in 1971 to 15.5% in 2001. We cannot thus conclude that people who leave churches necessarily remain religious and turn to other religions. For example, as found in other research in the UK, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) discovered that the relatively small growth of the holistic milieu does not compensate for the larger decline of the congregational domain. Indeed, the fall in numbers of Christian attendees is much higher than the growth of the spiritualities and other new religious movements. These non-Christian or non-mainstream Christian groups do not necessarily provide a spiritual refuge for all dissatisfied Christians: many of these church leavers can also become non-religious. However, there are nevertheless church leavers interested in other religious groups and this adds to Australia's religious diversity.

Faced with these changes, classical theories of secularisation are adequate to describe the current state of mainstream religious churches, but fail to address Australia's current religious diversification and religious revitalisation, especially among Pentecostals, Buddhists, Muslims and neo-pagan groups. With this increased

vitality comes increased differentiation and thus increased competition between religious groups. Further, spirituality, as a more personal approach to the religious phenomenon, has grown over the past few years (see below). On top of this, although Australia's governmentality is still overtly secular, conservative Christians in national politics formed a coalition (the Lyons Forum) in 1992 to press for Christian values in government (Maddox, 2001). And a first in Australia, a political party, the Family First Party, representing a network of Pentecostal groups, won a critical seat in the Senate.

Davie (2002, pp 147-50) observes that on this continuum between religious obligation and religious voluntarism, Europe is slowly shifting towards the voluntarist end. As Australia is a hybrid case between these two models, one can wonder if Australia is shifting towards this voluntarist end as well? Bouma (2006) has recently claimed that for Australians, religion must be a low-temperature phenomenon. Religion is not something to get overtly enthusiastic about, and the cultural aspect of Australian identity will always prevent Australia moving towards the US model. As Bouma states, 'It is not characteristically Australian to trumpet encounters with the spiritual like some American televangelists' (Bouma, 2006, p 2). Following this observation, Bouma aptly describes the Australian soul in terms of religion and spirituality as 'a shy hope in the heart'. For this phrase, he was influenced by Manning Clarke's comment about the ANZAC spirit, 'A whisper in the mind and a shy hope in the heart'. As Bouma (2006, p 2) explains about religion and spirituality in Australia:

A shy hope in the heart aptly expresses the nature of Australian religion and spirituality. There is a profound shyness – yet a deeply grounded hope – held tenderly in the heart, in the heart of Australia.[...] Australians hold the spiritual gently in their hearts, speaking tentatively about it. The spiritual is treated as sacred. What is held protectively in the heart is sacred; the sacred is handled with great care. Not all things that evoke awe and wonder are loud and noisy, brassy and for sale.

This shyness does not reflect a weak indication of the religious and spiritual vitality, and appears to stay and might even grow in modest size.

For this 'shy' approach to religion to reach the US voluntarist level in its full-blown proportion is, I believe, difficult in the Australian context. It is partly related to a strong Australian value, that of the tall poppy syndrome. This syndrome refers to the behavioural traits of Australians to cut down those who are 'superior' to them (Hughes et al, 2003). Respect for social position has long been the butt of Australian humour. People who expect that their claims to a higher class will give them a place in society soon find it more likely to exclude them from social life. Equally, those who put themselves on a pedestal are quickly brought down to earth. Australia has long been known for its dislike of 'tall poppies', and this applies to religious groups that are being 'too' successful and/or that move too close to the public sphere. For Australians, religion is not something to get

overtly enthusiastic about. It is part of the ordinary Australian imaginary that is characterised by distaste for display – whether aesthetic or affective – and that includes religion and spiritualities that should not make any symbolic excess out of ordinary events (Sinclair, 2004). This value needs to be seen in contrast to another one, that of egalitarianism and of mateship with an inclination to support the underdog which is reflected in the entrenched Australian norm of a ‘fair go’. In terms of religion, this ‘fair go’ attitude gives to every religious group a chance to establish itself (to a certain degree) in Australian society, thus adding to Australia’s diversity, while not forgetting that these groups should take it easy about religion. Having described these two typical Australian values (Hughes et al, 2003), and taking into account that some groups are allowed to get taller than others (for example, the Roman Catholic church versus the Church of Scientology) and have a fairer go than others (for example, the Anglican church versus Islam) the de-secularisation process of Australia could thus be seen as stuck for a very long time between these two values which would make Australia always in a mid-point between the European exceptional case and the US voluntarist one.

A de-secularisation process in Australia?

Arguing with the multiple modernisation thesis that there are different types of de-secularisation processes in the world is only the beginning. What needs to be done now is to be able to characterise the specific de-secularisation process in Australia using an analytical method of analysis. For this, Dobbelaere (2002)’s theories of secularisation might be of help. He does not work on the different dynamics of secularisation (horizontal process) like Martin but on its different levels (vertical process). For Dobbelaere (2002), there are three levels. The first one is *societal secularisation* (also called, in his terms, ‘*laicisation*’ for the societal or macro level). It deals with the change of structure, which has occurred with the industrialisation of Western societies, and refers to a functional differentiation process. Through this process many sub-systems are developed and perform different functions that are structurally different. Religion, as an institution, is thus no longer an overarching institution but one of many. This is basically the definition of secularisation given by Casanova (2006) earlier in this chapter. The second dimension is *organisational secularisation* (also called, in his terms, ‘religious change’ for the organisation or meso level) and reflects changes at the level of religious organisations, such as churches, denominations, sects and new religious movements. At this level, the study of the decline and emergence of certain types of religious groups can be conducted. The last dimension, *individual secularisation* (also called ‘religious involvement’ for the individual or micro level), refers to the individual level and deals with the way an individual believes in a specific religion and how this person is integrated into a religious group.

As there are multiple processes of secularisation, there will thus be multiple processes of de-secularisation such as the political re-entering of the public sphere by certain religious groups (Kepel, 1994; Lawrence, 1998), the cultural

transaction operated by religious and spiritual groups and individuals via consumer culture and popular culture (Bauman, 1998; Possamai, 2005a), and the growth of a type of religious social capital generated by the transnational networks of new immigrant and ethnic communities (Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy, 2008). However, this chapter now attempts to pinpoint the processes of de-secularisation in Australia.

Societal de-secularisation

For the first time since the First World War ... when Irish Catholic Australians condemned Australian government involvement in Britain's war against the Prussian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires (but especially against the Irish rebels), every level of Australian politics had become saturated with debates over religion and its place in the secular body politic of the Commonwealth. Whereas a decade before, religion had hardly ruffled the surface of multi-cultural Australia.... (Jakubowicz, 2005, p 51)

Since the election of the conservative federal government in 1996 in Australia, preference for religious provision of services has become a policy priority. Senior church people have increasingly become influential with senior political operatives. The rise of the Pentecostal Hillsong church (Sydney) has drawn politicians to their gatherings and in 2004 a Pentecostal party won a Senate seat. Over the past 10 years, religion, it can be argued, has moved back into the mainstream of the political flow, but in a shy manner. While in the past politicians have kept their faith to the private sphere, public display of religiosity has become prominent over the Howard government's third term, but it is still far removed from US-type presidential races in which faith-based politics is of high importance (Maddox, 2005). The overt appeal to the Gospel and to Christian values are more common in the discourse of US presidents than Australian prime ministers.

We can thus argue that by having religion coming back to the public sphere of politics, we are faced with a process of de-secularisation at the societal level; however, comparatively speaking, this very 'shy' re-emergence of religion in political life is far from leading to an important impact.

Organisational de-secularisation

During the move to multiculturalism in the 1970s, non-mainstream religious groups developed in Australia. Increased diverse immigration corresponded to an increase in new religious movements around the same time (Bouma, 2005). It can be argued that increased congregationalism has had a resultant effect in the decrease in attendance of the mainstream churches in Australia. Such changes have meant that Australia has moved from a culture of 'obligation' towards a culture of 'consumption/choice'.

Australia is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world (Bouma, 2006), and this has happened largely peacefully and without major clashes between religious groups. According to Bouma (1999) and Sheen (1996) there have, nevertheless, been incidents of discrimination, vilification, harassment and conflict in Australia. For Sheen (1996) new religious movements suffer at the hands of authority and the media. With regard to Islam, especially after 9/11, there were negative media portrayals, together with discriminatory rhetoric, policy and practices at the level of the state against Muslims (Poynting and Perry, 2007). However, according to Bouma (1999), and taking into consideration other countries, Australia appears to have an enviably low rate of the occurrence of religious intergroup hostility. Richardson (1999) believes that Australia has its share of controversy but not as much as in Western Europe. On the other hand, as Bouma has underlined from the Religious Freedom Act (HREOC, 1998), the current legal protections against discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, at federal, state and territory levels, are inadequate, and existing blasphemy laws do not protect religions other than Christianity.

Nevertheless, there are now many more religious groups offering their 'product' in a religious market being tried out by many consumers. Indeed, Australia is home to many ideas and practices found in alternative spiritualities and new religious movements, and is currently hosting many New Age practices and ideas (Possamai, 2005b).

Another example is the religious groups that are part of new immigrant and ethnic communities and very often take on new forms to be capable of survival in the new land,² and are thus reaching beyond traditional ethnic and cultural boundaries. In Australia, these groups constitute the largest segment of the phenomenon of increasing religious diversity (Ireland, 1999). They celebrate and maintain a way of life and a religious culture from elsewhere, but they also are working in Australian society: not just resisting pressures for assimilation, but helping members translate the norms and values of their land of origin into the new Australian context.

At this level, it can be argued that Australia is going through a de-secularisation process because of the vitality of its religious diversity. A counter-argument could claim that the expansion of the number of religious groups does not mean that they attract more people than if there were fewer such groups (Bruce, 2002). However, this chapter follows the view of Yang and Ebaugh (2001, p 269), who refer to the 'new paradigm' in the sociology of religion 'that refutes secularisation theories: Internal and external religious pluralism, instead of leading to the decline of religion, encourages institutional and theological transformations that energize and revitalize religions [...] these changes have transnational implications for global religious systems – implications that are facilitated by the material and organizational resources that new [...] immigrants possess'.

However, stating the simple fact that Australia is welcoming a variety of new ethnic religious communities does not necessarily lead to a straightforward de-secularisation process. Immigrant new religions have different degrees of success in Australia with regard to acceptance and growth/continuation of

practice by members. This has had a significant impact on the intensity of the de-secularisation process in Australia (for more information, see Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy, 2008).

Individual de-secularisation

As in many other Western countries, Australians appear to no longer need to belong to a specific religious group in order to 'believe'. The 'spiritual' revolution outside of an organised religion has been strong in Australia. Cases in point are the New Age and neo-pagan network (Possamai, 2005b), hyper-real religions (that is, religions such as Jediism and Matrixism created from popular culture by individuals) (Possamai, 2005a), Western appropriation of forms of Buddhism, or even traditional religions lived outside of their institutions, such as believing without belonging (Davie, 2002). Although churches are noting declines in attendance, it does not mean that people are less religious/spiritual.

Part of this phenomenon is the growth of spirituality in Australia (Tacey, 2000; Bouma, 2006) outside of religious groups and inside as well. As Wuthnow (2001, p 307) claims, 'many people who practice spirituality in their own ways still go to church or synagogue'. Indeed, social scientists find from various surveys (for example, Marler and Hadaway, 2002; Hughes et al, 2004) that the large majority of the people surveyed claim to be religious and spiritual at the same time. This claim might reflect a stronger engagement in religious practices and beliefs than, for example, a non-practising Catholic who still claims to be of that religion in the census.

At this individual level, it can be observed that Australia is being de-secularised through the growth of spirituality.

Australia's de-secularisation process

The United States was born as a modern secular state, never knew the established church of the European caesaro-papist absolutist state, and did not need to go through a European process of secular differentiation in order to become a modern secular society. (Casanova, 2006, p 12)

The beginning of Australia saw religion being used as a tool of social control to help build a modern secular society. It was used by the state to 'civilise' the prisoner in penal colonies, the free settlers and the Indigenous inhabitants of the land. Although Australia was also born as a modern secular state, religion was used in conjunction with the state for this modernisation process. Overall, the colonisation process of Australia itself might explain its hybridity between the US (which started modernisation without any established church) and Europe (which had tensions with the established church during the modernisation process).

If religion and spiritualities are ‘a shy hope in the heart’, as Bouma (2006) details, the de-secularisation process could be characterised the same way. Religions and spiritualities are diversifying and are being revitalised in Australia, but this happens, as Bouma indicates, at a ‘low temperature’. There are no overt claims from any religious group to take central stage at the societal level, but groups and individuals are discreetly active at the organisational and individual levels. As the definition of secularisation is always connected to how religion is defined (Casanova, 2006), one might thus think of the Australian secularisation process as ‘a hopeless shy heartburn’ at the organisational and individual level. Because religion has never been strong at the societal level in Australia, the Australian government saw religion as an issue of not much consequence that could be left forgotten like a social pain of *no* consequence that was supposed to heal itself. Now, the government can no longer ignore religions and spiritualities and this Australian religious diversity needs to be carefully managed (Bouma, 2005).

Conclusion

Concerns about the re-emergence of religion in Australia suggest that new forms of religious life may undermine powers of deliberation and voting among members, promote hate rather than negotiation and transform pluralism into parochialism. However, as analysed in this chapter, this re-emergence happens at the organisational and individual levels, and not strongly at the societal one. Against these fears are the hopes that civil society is enriched and revitalised as it diversifies, and that new forms of civic engagement, constituting a ‘politics of pluralisation’, are emerging (Ireland, 1999). Perhaps with this de-secularisation process, we can see new vitality in civil society, new forms of civic engagement and a new democratic politics in which democratic institutions are not corroded. However, this vitality is of a ‘shy’ type.

More research needs to be done on the various types of de-secularisation processes in the world. This chapter used Australia as a case study utilising as a method of analysis Dobbelaere’s three levels of secularisation. A comparison between Australia and other countries will certainly provide an understanding of other types of de-secularisation processes around the world and fine-tune our understanding of the various types and sub-types of de-secularisation.

What is happening in Australia as a de-secularisation process might provide a source of knowledge and understanding that could become useful when dealing with religious and secular issues in the world. As Bouma (2005, p 49) explains:

What has become clear to me is that religious diversity is not a disease to be overcome, but a cultural resource that can be used to enrich the capacity of a society to operate effectively in a global context.

Notes

¹ In 2001, 23% of the Australian population was born overseas.

² However, not all immigrants maintain a country-of-origin religious identity. Some turn away from the dominant tradition of their country of origin to join other religious affiliations (Warner and Wittner, 1998).

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