

Secularization and Its Discontents

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Introduction

This book examines the sociology of contemporary religion, drawing not only upon recent debates but also from the classical resources of the founding scholars of the discipline. The writings of Durkheim and Weber continue to offer enduring insights into the evolving condition of religion in the West.

The title of this book is drawn from Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). For Freud (1856–1939), the unrelenting enemy of rational civilization was the seething appetites of the Id, the untamed impulses of sexual conquest and aggressive self-interest in the depths of the human psyche. Religion had served civilization well, in providing mechanisms to control the Id's destructive impulses. Although it therefore had an ethical utility, Freud only allowed for two origins for religion (1927). On the one hand, it was a natural human response to the irresistible forces of the natural world: the farmer prayed for a bountiful harvest and a mild winter, knowing that the mild weather needed to secure a good crop was beyond human control or guarantee. On the other, religion was a projection of the collective oedipal complex that had framed early human life. Freud's account of human psycho-religious origins was dismissed by the Oxford anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1965) as a 'just so story' and a 'fairy tale'. For Freud, the urge of young men to kill the father of the tribe required the performance of rituals to atone for their common and generational guilt (1913), and this was combined with a longing for a father-figure that was projected as a god – 'the primal father was the original image of God, the model on which later generations have shaped the image of God' (1927; 1995, 712).

Given his account of the beneficial contribution of religion, Freud might have been expected to welcome its continuance, if only as a useful fiction, strengthening common morality and assuaging the inevitable oedipal guilt (1913). However, Freud was deeply and instinctively anti-religious, considering it to be no more than an illusion (1927). There was, for Freud, no place for concepts of revelation in religion, nor did he find credible or appealing accounts

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of religion that emphasize the human quest for meaning and awareness of the spiritual or the transcendent. In an early essay he had argued that religion is nothing more than a collective neurosis, with repetitive religious actions mirroring the neurotic obsessions of an individual compulsive disorder (1907).

In view of these similarities and analogies one might venture to . . . describe neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis. (Freud: 1907; Gay: 1995, 435)

Freud was fully persuaded that religion was in essence anti-rational, and that enlightened reason was the foundation stone of the rise of civilized modernity (1930). As a consequence, therefore, although religion had contributed to the advance of civilization, at its core it was alien, outmoded, an essentially obsolete combination of irrationality, repression and mere superstition. Religion was an infantile illusion, a residue of the primitive that had failed to stand the test of time (1927). Religion, for Freud, would simply have to go, and had nothing more to offer the advance of Western civilization.

Religion . . . arose out of the Oedipal complex, out of the relation to the Father. If this view is right, it is to be supposed that a turning away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development. (Freud: 1927; Gay: 1995, 713)

Early sociologists of religion did not necessarily share Freud's dogmatic anti-religious convictions, although he shared with Comte the confident conviction that man come of age had no more need for traditional religion. However, both Durkheim and Weber recognized that Western modernity appeared increasingly inhospitable to religion. Grounded in the deteriorating condition of Christianity in Western Europe and building upon these scholars' insights, classical secularization theory argued that the demise of religion was sociologically determined and culturally inevitable. Secularization was therefore understood to be both a process of social change, closely intertwined with the evolution of the modern world, and also a theory of increasing religious marginalization not only descriptive of present and past transitions but predictive of a future society where religion would have little or no public influence, social utility or plausible claim to a revelatory authority that in any sense transcended reason. On its long march to obscurity and eventual extinction, religion would retreat from the public to the private, from universal truth

to personal conviction, from the all-embracing life framework to the optional, spiritual lifestyle accessory. Increasingly eliminated from the corridors of power and cultural influence, the resilient residues of religion would have to make do increasingly with colonizing the margins of the late modern world.

More recently than Freud, the eminent sociologist of religion and eloquent exponent of classical secularization theory, Bryan Wilson, used the title 'Secularization and its Discontents' for the final chapter of his *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (1982). Wilson emphasized in this chapter the long-term and trans-cultural dimensions of the process of secularization. He particularly emphasized the transition from the communal to the societal, which results not only in diminished space for religious functions, but also reduces the sense of communal and mutual responsibility and weakens the transmission of a shared moral code. For Wilson, not only did religious believers resist the logic of the sociological analysis that demonstrated the increasing marginalization of religion, there was also discontent at the corollarous or even consequential decline in social cohesion. Wilson's exposition of secularization theory is a remorseless case for the prosecution: every irruption of new religious zeal becomes an indicator of further diminution of religion's social significance, as the majority population become 'better insulated from the effects of religious enthusiasm' (1982, 153). Nonetheless, Wilson insisted on an essential distinction between sociological analysis of the process of secularization and the secularist's advocacy of a secular society:

To put forward the secularization thesis as an explanation of what happens in society is not to be a secularist, nor to applaud secularity; it is only to document and to illustrate social change . . . (1982, 148)

For Wilson, therefore, classical secularization theory was not partisan, nor driven by an anti-religious agenda, but simply invited observers and participants of contemporary religion to face the harsh realities of the long-term decline in the influence, status and significance of religion. This is a crucial distinction: the secularist has an anti-religious agenda to propound, the secularization theorist seeks to provide an analytical account of the cultural transformations that have impacted the authority, breadth of reach and social significance of religion.

The process and the theory of secularization inevitably produce discontents, not only among those committed to a particular religious faith who may find rumours of its demise decidedly premature, but also among social

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theorists. Religionists may resist the brute empirical facts of the marginalization of religion. In my undergraduate classes are often found dedicated Christians who try to question the reliability of the evidence of 150 years of decline in church attendance. Similarly, their Muslim fellow-students characteristically argue that the decline of Western religion is a problem for Christianity but an opportunity for Islam. In a previous study (Warner: 2007), I explored evangelical 'vision inflation', in which conservative Christians evoke a promised land of imminent and epoch-changing advance, in defiance of the secularizing trends that result in diminishing returns for religious recruitment drives. Not only are their expectations inflated, but the centre of gravity for secularization is misdiagnosed: devout enthusiasts typically claim that decline is the fault of the church for not being sufficiently engaged with contemporary culture, with the naïve hope that, in changing the style of the church, they will transform the prospects for religion in Britain.

A further type of religious discontent similarly locates the source of secularization within the church. Liberals blame the uncompromising zeal of fundamentalists for alienating sophisticated unbelievers. Meanwhile evangelicals condemn liberals for diluting distinctive Christian beliefs until there is nothing left worth believing in and no reason to bother with church. It appears that many religionists, Christian and non-Christian, conservative and liberal, find it more palatable to diagnose defective religion as the cause of secularization. If they blame religious institutions for their own marginalization, there is hope in the fact that the forms of religion may yet be transformed. However, if the source of the transformed significance of religion is identified in terms of social forces, these are more likely to prove unassailable, and the destiny of organized religion becomes more bleak and more difficult to overturn.

Among social theorists, many of whom have no declared religious position of their own, the theory of secularization, in particular its 'hard' or 'classical' form that points towards the inevitable cultural obsolescence of organized religion, has generated a growing number of critical responses. First, some are sceptical whether there ever was a 'golden age' of religion against which the last hundred years can be fairly compared. Second, some argue for a 'life-cycle' of the rise and fall of religious organizations, claiming this is a more significant and enduring pattern than the particularities of the dominant forms of Christianity in modernity. Third, some identify an additional variable in the Western interaction between modernity and religion: in Western Europe the extent of secularity is in inverse proportion to the previous power of the dominant form of religion; in the United States, a free market in religion

appears to facilitate the relative buoyancy and influence of religion, with new forms gathering strength even as some institutions enter accelerating decline. Fourth, some question the applicability of secularization theory beyond Western Europe (plus Australia and New Zealand, Canada and the northern urban centres in the United States). The global resilience of religion indicates that while modernity and responses to religion are undoubtedly interconnected, the configurations are multiple and complex, with some forms of modernity and religion apparently enjoying a mutually strengthening coexistence. Fifth, some note the return of religion to the public square, which may indicate that exclusivist secularity was itself time-bound and unsustainable, indicating possibilities of a multi-faith or post-secular future. This book examines many such perspectives, and all represent in some measure a discontent with secularization theory, some repudiating it, others seeking a more refined, complex and problematized account of the condition and prospects for religion, in and beyond modernity.

Social scientific methodologies in the study of religion are both quantitative and qualitative (Ammerman et al.: 1998; Robson: 2002; Bryman: 2004; Silverman: 2004). That is, the function, authority and influence of religion can all be tracked both through numerical data and through personal perspectives gathered from individual interviews, focus groups or related approaches. If I were forced to choose a single approach, it would have to be the qualitative, because personal perspectives can be assembled into a rich description that provides new and often unexpected insights. Nonetheless, there is simply no need for a methodological war: the fact is that these approaches segment the phenomenon of religion in the contemporary world and then analyse the available data in different ways, but there is no mutual exclusivity. The methodologies are best considered as complementary. For example, the beliefs of North American evangelicals have been subject to quantitative and qualitative analysis (Hunter: 1983; 1987; Smith: 1998; 2000; Bramadat: 2000), and these studies build up a fuller understanding when set side by side.

In this particular study, seeking to provide an overview of the phenomenon of religion in the early twenty-first century, there is a need to provide a perspective from the past 150 years, and that requires some longitudinal and quantitative data. However, at each step in the argument, as we identify emerging patterns of decay and resurgence in contemporary forms of religion, there is significant room for new qualitative studies. Although the data examined in this book to set the context for the theoretical debates are mostly quantitative, therefore, the book also represents an agenda for qualitative research. Each section of the

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argument could readily be developed, enhanced or even refuted, by future cohorts of research students and postdoctoral researchers.

The vitality, social significance and likely prognosis for religion in the contemporary world will inevitably be much debated. Within the scholarly community of sociologists of religion, this continues to be an immensely fascinating and rewarding field of investigation. It is my hope that this book will contribute to this field of research in three ways: by outlining the landscape of contemporary debates and proposing a new synthesis of conflictual perspectives, by identifying the enduring significance of the insights of the early sociologists of religion and by examining some contemporary trends in the re-articulation of traditional religion, in re-aligned convergence with contemporary socio-cultural priorities and preoccupations.

Classical Secularization Theory

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1.1 Empirical data of church decline

The English church attendance surveys (1979–2005) have provided a quarter of a century narrative of sustained church decline (Brierley: 1991a; 2000; 2003; 2006). The trajectory appears unremitting: the Christian churches have become ever more marginalized, with less and less people attending on Sundays. The scale and speed of decline are staggering: English congregations have on average halved in size in the last quarter century.

The longer historical view reinforces this trend very considerably. The Census of Religious Worship in 1851 was conducted under the leadership of Horace Mann, the Registrar General (Mann: 1853). A form was sent to the minister of every known place of worship for completion on Sunday 30 March 1851, the day before the National Census itself. Mann's report detailed the number of buildings used for public worship, the number of sittings (services) and the number of attendances. A mere 1.1 per cent of churches failed to specify sittings and attendances in England and Wales, which represented a remarkably high level of cooperation. 14 per cent declined to comply in

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Scotland, which indicates a greater independence from Westminster, but still represents a very high level of return. This resource therefore provides an invaluable snapshot of the level of mid-nineteenth-century church attendance.

With all quantitative data it is possible to claim unreliability and bias. At the time some clergy complained there was ambiguity over whether churches included or excluded Sunday school attendees. They noted that attendance on that particular Sunday could have been distorted because there was bad weather and because it was Mothering Sunday. They warned that some churches were more likely to enjoy multiple attendances, whether the devotee went to several services in a single church or even attended different denominations in the morning and evening. They cautioned that some ministers might have exaggerated the size of their congregations. The most forceful objections after the results were published came from Anglican clergy, presumably prompted by the fact that the results provided an unexpected and unwelcome surprise for the established church.

1851 proved to be the last time that recording church attendance was part of a national census. For the 1861 census, Anglicans argued that what should be counted was not attendance but affiliation. The free churches argued against this shift of approach. They claimed that a question about affiliation would produce unreliable and uninformative data, eliciting a default response of nominal loyalty to the established church. The question would therefore build an inevitable pro-Anglican bias into the data collection. Moreover, the free churches argued that the hard-won principle of freedom of religion set necessary limits to governmental intrusion into the religious realm. They argued that while it was legitimate to count attendance or attendees at church services, it was inappropriate for personal religious convictions to be subject to enquiry from the state. Faced with this methodological impasse and ecclesiastical dispute, the government decided against any further enquiry into religious affiliation or church attendance at that time.

Mann was clear that attendances produced more significant data than affiliation:

The outward conduct of persons furnishes a better guide to their religious state than can be gained by merely vague professions. (Mann: 1853, cxix)

Unfortunately, by counting attendance rather than attendees, Mann inevitably double- or even treble-counted the more zealous. Some subsequent surveys have preferred to count the laity's professed attendance. However, this is often

exaggerated, at least in cultures that approve of regular churchgoing, where respondents may overstate their frequency of attendance to conform with what they perceive to be a normative cultural expectation or practice (Hadaway and Marler: 1998; Marler and Hadaway: 1999).

Currie, Gilbert and Horsley (1977) counted formal membership as an explicit act of denominational commitment. The problem with this method is that in growing churches the total in formal membership can be considerably smaller than the actual congregation, while in declining churches people may stop attending long before their names are removed from any official membership list. Indeed I have come across churches where death has been known to precede final removal from the official membership roll by several years. The tendency for this time lag therefore builds a tendency to unreliability into membership data. Furthermore, while some churches prefer strict limitations on access to membership, others are more free and easy, so that the correlation between membership roll and size of congregation may vary considerably. In some churches membership is granted as soon as requested, whereas in others, often the more conservative that tend to make much higher demands of commitment and conformity upon their members, it follows a long process of induction into doctrines and practices.

More recently, Gill (1993) and Brierley (Brierley et al.: 1998; Brierley and Sanger: 1999; Brierley: 2001) have argued that the most useful data come from counting actual attendees, avoiding the multiple counting of those who attend more than one each Sunday. The variety of methodologies means that there is no exact comparison between different data sets. For longitudinal studies, it is only possible to compare the best available information, harmonized as well as possible, even if variations in data collection prevent precise comparisons. Despite the limitations of his methodology and the difficulties of comparison with subsequent data sets, Mann provides a benchmark against which to measure more recent trends in church attendance.

Historical enquiry has continued to evaluate the reliability of Mann's data collection and analysis and the implications of his data. Snell and Ell (2000) identified aspects not emphasized in the immediate aftermath of the census, notably an uneven distribution of Anglicans, dominating the Tory shires, and for Methodists particular strength in the north and south-west. When it was first published, the census generated two provocative discoveries. First, Mann's attendance figures revealed an unexpectedly low market share for the established church: Anglicans 5,292,551; Roman Catholics 383,630; free churches 5,116,410. The Roman Catholic proportion is very low compared with 100 or

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150 years later, and that is explained by the subsequent waves of Roman Catholic immigration. The unexpected result at the time was the near 1:1 ratio of Anglicans to Dissenters. Chadwick emphasized the immediate political impact:

Admit that more dissenters may have attended their chapels twice or thrice, deduct Jews and Mormons and even Roman Catholics, and the statistics still pointed to the uncomfortable fact that in gross the dissenting churches commanded the allegiance of nearly half the population of England and Wales . . . It finally established the impossibility of treating the establishment as privileged on the ground that it was the church of the immense majority of the people. (Chadwick: 1966, 367–369)

This represented a seismic shift from the Compton census of 1676 (Snell and Ell: 2000, ch. 8). In 1676, a significant measure of legal and social enforcement of conformity had resulted in the following market share: Anglican 95.31 per cent, RC 0.8 per cent, Free 3.89 per cent. In 1851, this had become: Anglican 49 per cent, RC 3.6 per cent, Free 47.4 per cent. Snell and Ell estimate that, in the period from 1700 to 1851, enterprising dissenters formed 70 new free church sects and denominations (Snell and Ell: 2000, 404). Even if many of these sects erupted for a generation and then were gone, this represents a distinctive religious climate of enterprise and innovation, diversification and new missional engagement with the contemporary. The age of imperial expansion had therefore also been an age of denominational proliferation. An era of entrepreneurial opportunity gave a measure of cultural validity, even in the face of sustained disapproval or even disdain from the established church, to the captains of the religious cottage industries that were generating new experiments and outlets in chapel life.

Mann's own interpretation of the data emphasized not the rising market share of the proliferating free churches, but the fact that the total church attendance represented a considerably lower proportion of the population than Victorian rhetoric of a Christian civilization would have led many to expect. Mann adjusted his totals to exclude multiple attendance and estimated the total number of individual attendees to be 7,261,032. He reckoned that 70 per cent of the population 'should be able' to attend, leaving aside those who were ill, caring for others, working and so on. He therefore calculated the potential total of attendees to be 12,549,326, of whom around 5,250,000 chose to be absent. On Mann's calculations, of those who were physically able to attend, no less than 43 per cent chose to stay away. At the time this was

surprising, even shocking, even though Mann cushioned the blow by his generous calculation of the proportion excluded by circumstances from being able to attend. Mann’s calculations are unrealistically precise, but in his analysis the Census exposed completely unexpected levels of secularity in Victorian Britain. For Mann, the 1851 Census represented a significant decline from what the mid-Victorians perceived to be previously much higher levels of church attendance and church influence. However, viewed from the twenty-first century, the 1851 census represents a high point from which attendance and influence have suffered prolonged and enervating decline.

Even though the precise level of church attendance that can reasonably be derived from Mann’s data continues to be contested, the longitudinal trend is unambiguous. Bruce (1995; 1996; 2002) reworked Mann’s data to estimate church attendance in 1851 of 40–60 per cent. However, if an adjustment is made to the 1851 totals in accordance with the proportion who attended twice in 1902–3, the 1851 church attendance percentage might only have been 24 per cent (Gill: 1993). The *Daily News* survey (1902–3) reported church attendance in London at 19 per cent. Mass Observation (1947) recorded church attendance of 15 per cent. Brierley’s series of church attendance surveys (2006a) produced the following results: 1979: 12 per cent; 1989: 10 per cent; 1998: 7.5 per cent; 2005: 6.3 per cent. Even if the decline is from a peak of 24 per cent rather than 60 per cent in 1851 (bearing in mind Mann’s view that this represented a considerable falling off in piety from former times), the fall from this level to 6.3 per cent in 150 years represents a devastating collapse in Christian participation (Figure 1.1).

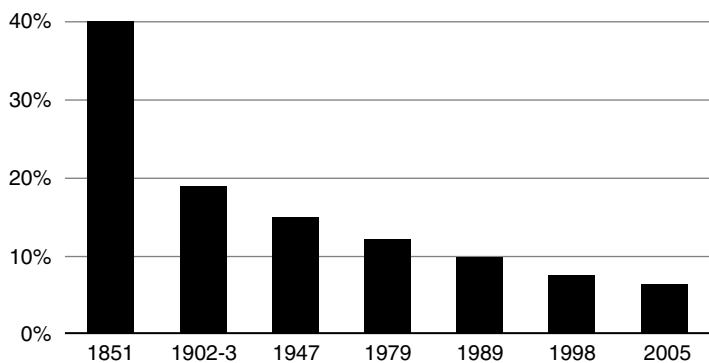


Figure 1.1 English Church Attendance – 150 years of decline.

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Robin Gill (2003: 69–168) identified long-term denominational trends. He concluded that 1821–51 saw a general increase in church attendance, followed by free church increase and Anglican decline from 1851 to the 1880s. From the 1880s to 1919 there was general Protestant decline, and there was continuing decline from after the First World War to the end of the century. To Gill's panorama we can add that the general trend of decline accelerated further in the 1960s and 1990s. Among Roman Catholics in England we can trace a distinctive trend of late-onset decline, with church attendance holding up better until the last decades of the twentieth century, when decline suddenly became rapid, even vertiginous.

The empirical evidence is unambiguous. Church attendance as a proportion of the population no less than halved in 125 years (1951–79). In the next quarter century (1979–2005), church attendance no less than halved once again. Decade after decade Christian congregations in Britain, and indeed throughout Western Europe, have been haemorrhaging adults, children and youth.

Similarly, 65 per cent of babies born in 1900 were baptized in the Church of England, rising to 69.9 per cent in 1930. Since the Second World War the decline has been continuous: 1950 – 67.2 per cent; 1960 – 55.4 per cent; 1970 – 46.6 per cent; 1980 – 36.5 per cent; 1990 – 27.5 per cent; 2000 – 19.8 per cent. During the past decade the collapse of infant baptisms has continued: 2001 – 18.8 per cent; 2002 – 18.1 per cent; 2003 – 16.7 per cent; 2004 – 15.9 per cent; 2005: 15.3 per cent; 2006 – 14.3 per cent; 2007 – 13.4 per cent. The official Church of England website makes the point 'The infant baptism figures for 1980 and later years are not directly comparable with those of previous years, because from the returns have specified infant baptisms as those under one year of age in order to relate more realistically to live births'.¹ However, the scale of sustained decline in infant baptisms in the second half of the twentieth century is unambiguous and severe (Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

As for the proportion of marriages conducted by the Church of England, in 1900 it was 67 per cent, in 1950 50 per cent, in 1960 47 per cent, in 1970 41 per cent, in 1980 33 per cent and in 1995 30 per cent (Brierley: 1999, 8.5). The average for recent decades according the Church of England's own statistics was 34.2 per cent in the 1980s, 28.8 per cent in the 1990s and 23.3 per cent from 2001 to 2006.² Notwithstanding the occasional headline about church marriages coming back into fashion, the data are unambiguous: not only have regular congregations suffered catastrophic decline, but the wider penumbra of affiliation expressed through rites of passage has also suffered considerable

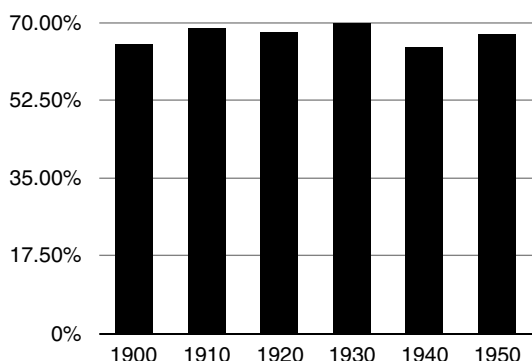


Figure 1.2 Church of England Infant Baptisms as a percentage of births, 1900–50.

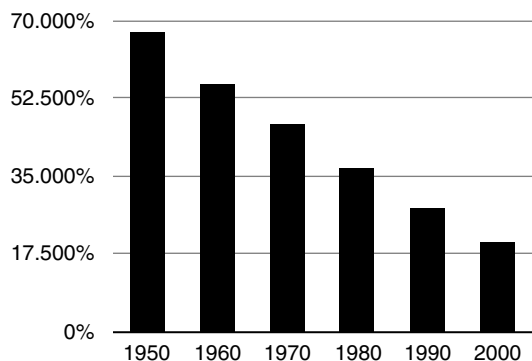


Figure 1.3 Church of England Infant Baptisms as a percentage of births, 1950–2000.

shrinkage. This statistical decline is symptomatic of the fact that the Christian religion has been suffering from a profound decline in social and religious significance. For example, many major government departments originated under the aegis of the church, but now function either predominantly or entirely as secular institutions, including health, education and social security. How long the Church of England can continue to retain any plausible legitimacy as the established church is surely becoming an unavoidable question.

This profound cultural transition demands investigation and explanation. It has been described as ‘the death of God’ (Bruce: 2002) and, somewhat more modestly, but no less starkly, ‘the death of Christian Britain’ (Brown: 2001). Whether the roots are traced to the rise of modernity, as Bruce argues, or are more immediately determined by the rise of feminism in the 1960s, as Brown

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concludes, the empirical data point towards the long-term, unidirectional and increasing marginalization of the Christian religion: it is unrealistic to describe this as anything less than a profound and potentially terminal crisis for the Christian churches. Whether or not Britain can be said to have become post-religious, there is clear evidence that the British, in common with many Western Europeans, if not in their entirety then certainly for a growing proportion, now inhabit a culture that is certainly post-Christendom, and quite probably, which marks an even greater cultural and religious departure, post-Christian.

1.2 The intellectual context of church decline

The nineteenth century saw new heights to the industrial revolution and the age of European empires. These advances combined with the perceived and celebrated triumph of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment to form the seductive and compelling narrative of modernity, and this was characteristically framed in male and Western European terms. The advancement of humankind (at the time, of course, and until recent decades this was habitually gendered as the ‘The Ascent of *Man*’) was assured. Western Europe represented the pinnacle of human progress and was under a moral obligation to take ‘true civilization’ and indeed ‘the highest religion’ to every corner of her Christian empires.

In some of the most influential formulations, this narrative of advancement expressly replaced conventional dependence upon traditional, moderate religion with a newly assertive confidence in human rationality. Attitudes to inherited religion were increasingly infused with new scepticism or outright repudiation. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who both celebrated and contributed seminal to the new age of enlightenment (Kant: 1784, ET 1970; 1787, ET 1929), claimed that the sceptical philosophy of David Hume (1711–76) decisively ‘interrupted my dogmatic slumber’ (Kant: 1783, ET 2004, 10). For Kant, the concepts of God and the immortality of the soul were not capable of being proved – indeed he exploded the old philosophical proofs of the existence of God – but they were worth retaining because they continued to be advantageous in advocating the pursuit of ethical living and promoting the categorical imperative. Kant therefore sought to construct a new form of religion within the limits of reason alone (Kant: 1793, ET 1998). With reason

sovereign over church tradition, the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Atonement of Christian theology were all subject to sceptical scrutiny and re-imagining (Kant: 1788, ET 1997), and could no longer be believed in conventional form.

For Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who became to many Europeans a priest of the new religion of philosophical idealism, the ascent of the human race to intellectual and spiritual enlightenment was embodied in his own philosophical investigations (see for example, Hegel: 1807, ET 1979, memorably described by William James as only intelligible with the help of hallucinogenic drugs). For this study Hegel's primary significance is that two very different nineteenth century Germans built upon his dialectical methods with a reconfiguration of theology, first in anthropocentric terms (Feuerbach) and then as a revisioning of a future where social justice was assured (Marx). Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), building on Hegel with an emphatic anthropocentrism, argued that the true meaning of theology was anthropology (1841, ET 1989). He concluded that Christian theology had divinized humanity's higher aspirations, and as a direct consequence had tended to denigrate humankind as sinful over against the goodness of God. This resulted, for Feuerbach, in a profound alienation from humanity's intrinsic higher ideals.

The religious antithesis that Feuerbach critiques is perhaps most apparent in John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1509–64, *Institutes*: ET 2001), where the knowledge of God and of humanity are both propounded, but the holiness of God is elevated in contrast with the sinfulness of 'total depravity'. And behind Calvin, of course, are the long shadows cast by the towering Father of Western Christian Theology, Catholic and Protestant, Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430). He was the elaborator, if not the inventor, of the doctrine of Original Sin, for whom human sinfulness was sexually transmitted at conception. Given contemporary Western obsession with sexual expressiveness and the church's long legacy of sexual discomfort, the clash of cultures is apparent, acute, and can only tend further to marginalize the Christian religion as outmoded and repressive. Augustine had lived with a woman before his conversion, but then abandoned her and remained celibate for the rest of his life, and Western Christianity, to paraphrase Freud, might be considered at least in part to be the collective outworking of Augustine's obsessive neurosis concerning guilt about sex.

In revolt against this problematic dialectic intrinsic to Christianity, Feuerbach invited humankind to reclaim these higher ideals for expression in human lives, and thereby come of age. For Feuerbach, rather than salvation

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being provided 'from above' with God redeeming a fallen race, self-salvation arises when human beings rediscover and seek to fulfil their innate and affirmed human potential. Moral idealism is no longer projected onto a transcendent deity, but can be appropriated with confidence as an achievable human goal.

George Eliot (1819–80), one of the greatest nineteenth century novelists in the English language, abandoned her evangelical faith as no longer intellectually tenable. She was Feuerbach's first English translator, but declined to follow his acerbic repudiation of religion: she continued to attend churches from time to time, and considered religion to have both aesthetic and ethical merits. In 1873, according to Frederick Myers, she told him in the Fellows' Garden at Trinity College Cambridge that she had further concluded that Kant's retention of God and the immortal soul was neither advantageous nor credible:

God, Immortality, Duty . . . how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third. (Myers: 1881)

In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx (1818–83) concluded that Feuerbach's reconfiguration of the significance of religion failed to take sufficient account of the social forces that structure and constrain human destiny. For Marxist neo-Hegelianism, dialectical materialism required facing up to the imprisoning realities of capitalist exploitation and the prospect of the overthrow of the economic injustice that had inevitably and demonstrably resulted from the ownership of capital in the hands of the few.

IV

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice.

. . .

VI

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.

VII

Feuerbach consequently does not see that the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs to a particular form of society.

...

XI

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it. (Marx: 1845, *Theses on Feuerbach*)

For Marx, religion was the drug of choice for many working people, a means of escape from the exigencies of a life without capital for those who were subject to increasing exploitation in the temporary age of capitalism (Marx and Engels: 1848).

... the struggle against religion is indirectly the fight against the world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people. (Marx: 1843, *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*)

Religion's second function, for Marx, was as a form of ideological legitimation. That is, organized religion performed the role of a compliant servant and propagandist for the owners of capital, pronouncing dogmas that justified the domination of the powerful and persuaded the working class to remain subservient under the yoke of economic tyranny.

The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man. (Marx: 1843, *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*)

For Marx, therefore, with the imminent and assured emergence of revolutionary consciousness, religion would be exposed as part escapism and as part bogus apologia for the ruling class. When the workers of the world united to reclaim ownership of capital, religion would therefore necessarily become obsolete. If it survived at all, it could only be as a throwback to the old oppressive order. Marx's rigorously materialist account of the origins and significance

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of both religion and social structures, expressly sociological, allowed no enduring significance for religion as the embodiment of ethical values, or as the articulation of the transcendent, or as the quest for meaning and truth. His account is expressly reductive, but raises pertinent questions about the willingness of organized religion to serve as consort to the powerful.

For Darwin (1809–82), natural selection produced an account of life on earth that was elegant in its simplicity without any need to depend upon traditional and literal Western interpretations of Genesis 1–3. For traditional Christians, Catholic as well as Protestant, who conceived knowledge as a single category in which theology held sway over science, the instinctive first reactions to the new science were often hostile and dismissive. Those among the English Bishops who dismissed Darwin were in the tradition of the Roman Cardinals who had condemned Galileo. It would take time for most believers to concede that science and theology operated as distinct fields of learning such that theology could no more adjudicate over the validity of the theory of evolution than biology could determine the existence of God.

Alongside this intellectual ferment, several leading Anglican liberals released *Essays and Reviews* in March 1860, just four months after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* published in November 1859. This rising tide of theological liberalism argued that the rise of biblical criticism meant that the Bible could no longer be conceived as the dictated oracles of God, but rather came to be seen as a complex interweaving of many different sources, often with significantly different emphases from one another. Christian doctrine was also reappraised, with scholars and church leaders increasingly articulating a distaste for and ultimately a rejection of a literal understanding of hell as the eternal destiny for many (Maurice: 1853), and punitive interpretations of the atonement. The miraculous narratives of the Bible could no longer be taken for granted as literal accounts of a world in which divine interventions were commonplace and self-authenticating. Possibilities of exaggeration, gullibility, superstition and myth-making could no longer be swept aside. Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, withheld from publication until 1903 when Butler had died (1835–1902), exposes with sometimes riotous humour these nineteenth century crises of faith. For Unitarians, the triumph of reason had meant the abandonment of the Trinity as an excess of metaphysical speculation. More broadly, by the end of the nineteenth century, the authority of the Bible, the credibility of traditional Christian doctrine and the intellectual authority of the pronouncements of the church had been severely attenuated.

In the First Vatican Council (1869–70), Roman Catholicism reacted against modernity with the uncompromisingly conservative pronouncements of *Dei Filius*, and sought to reinforce ecclesiastical authority in the face of a rising tide of scepticism by promulgating the dogma of papal infallibility in *Pastor Aeternus*. The resolute opposition to rationalism, liberalism and modernity was unambiguous:

If anyone says that in divine revelation there are contained no true mysteries properly so-called, but that all the dogmas of the faith can be understood and demonstrated by properly trained reason from natural principles: let him be anathema.

If anyone says that human studies are to be treated with such a degree of liberty that their assertions may be maintained as true even when they are opposed to divine revelation, and that they may not be forbidden by the church: let him be anathema.

If anyone says that it is possible that at some time, given the advancement of knowledge, a sense may be assigned to the dogmas propounded by the church which is different from that which the church has understood and understands: let him be anathema.

And so in the performance of our supreme pastoral office, we beseech for the love of Jesus Christ and we command, by the authority of him who is also our God and savior, all faithful Christians, especially those in authority or who have the duty of teaching, that they contribute their zeal and labor to the warding off and elimination of these errors from the church and to the spreading of the light of the pure faith.

But since it is not enough to avoid the contamination of heresy unless those errors are carefully shunned which approach it in greater or less degree, we warn all of their duty to observe the constitutions and decrees in which such wrong opinions, though not expressly mentioned in this document, have been banned and forbidden by this Holy See. (Canons of Session 3, 24 April 1870)

Around the same time, the conservative evangelicals of Old Princeton intensified the theory of biblical infallibility (Barr: 1977; Murphy: 1996). No matter how little common ground was apparent at the time between Roman Catholicism and the Evangelical Right, these two reformulations of scriptural and papal supremacy represented a defiant assertiveness in reaction against the crisis of religious authority that was engulfing Western religion. Emphatic conservatism, Catholic as much as Protestant, is symptomatic of a fundamental diminution of religious power. Initially at the leading edge of high culture, but increasingly in the majority culture as well, the intellectual impact of modernity meant that the authority of religion would never be the same again.

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Beyond the resistant but inevitably eroding conservative enclaves, increasing numbers of theologians, priests and laity came to conclude that Christianity would need to be radically reconceived, or otherwise gradually abandoned.

The cultural climate of early modernity was conducive to an evolutionary conception of human civilization (Cahoone: 1996). For Marx (1848), feudalism gave way to capitalism, which would assuredly and imminently give way to revolutionary consciousness and the communist revolution. Religion could then be dispensed with as an illusory tool of the oppressors. For Comte (1830–46, ET 1896), acknowledged widely as the father of sociology, the theological age of superstition had given way to the metaphysical age of abstract theorizing about religion, but this, in turn, was giving way in his own generation to the triumph of positivism and the elimination of traditional religion. Comte even launched a ‘church’ of positivism, hoping to retain the benefits of a ritualized ethical community after the death of supernatural religion. However, Comtean godless religion did not prove enduringly popular.

The concept of a narrative of modernization that resulted in religion becoming obsolete remained beguiling. Freud later proposed a similar three-stage process that resulted in the inevitable marginalization of religion, building on his earlier account of religion as religious neurosis (Freud: 1907; Gay: 1995) and a social projection of the Oedipal complex (Freud: 1913). In Freud’s (1927; 1930) evolutionary model, the animist outlook gave way to the religious, which in turn was now giving way to the scientific. He also linked this to his theory of personal psychological development, so that animism correlated with the auto-eroticism of earliest childhood, religion with the Oedipal child and scientific humanism with personal maturity.

These grand narratives of human advance have in common both an antagonism towards and a presumed superiority over religion. They exhibit an assured assumption that the cultural narrative of modernity is advancing inevitably and with finality in the direction of pure and untrammelled atheism. Reason, science, modernization and cultural advance had combined to assure a post-religious emergent civilization. These narratives also have in common the assumption that humans come of age in the generation, and indeed in the writings of the religion-less seer, whether Feuerbach, Comte, Marx or Freud.

Nietzsche was bold enough to express the finality of this cultural trajectory. For him, churches had out-lived their credible usefulness and both God and religion were outmoded concepts. Empty and abandoned churches would come to be seen as no more than enormous tombstones, unintentional

memorials to the death of the Christian God. Such rhetoric was daring at the time, but by the end of the twentieth century British townscapes were littered with church buildings that had become charity shops, furniture warehouses or luxury apartments. This made it quite straightforward to suspect that the very concept of God as well as Christianity's religious buildings and institutions had become redundant. It was not just that less people were going to church each Sunday, but religion was drifting to the margins not only in the public, cultural, media and political spheres, but even so for the vast majority in their private lives.

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!' – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? Asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? Asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated? – Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? . . . Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him'.

'How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us - for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto'.

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. 'I have come too early', he said then; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – *and yet they have done it themselves*'.

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: 'What after all are

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these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?' (Nietzsche: ET 1974, 181–2, part 3, sec. 15, 'The Madman')

1.3 Social forces of secularization: individualism and rationalization

Following on from Marx and Comte, the second generation of early sociologists continued to give prominence to religion in their analyses of society, recognizing its centrality to social identities. Both Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Max Weber (1864–1920) considered it self-evident that Christianity had entered a phase of decline in Europe (for critical introductions see Hughes et al.: 2003; Morrison: 2006; Fenn: 2009). Durkheim (1912, ET 2001) developed a functionalist theory of religion, in which religion was a profoundly important, indeed essential articulation and enactment of social cohesion. Durkheim was so convinced of the societal importance of religion, he proposed a cyclical theory in which the demise of any particular religion was always likely to be followed by the emergence of new gods.

In short, the ancient gods grow old or die, and others are not yet born. Hence the futility of Comte's attempt to organize a religion with old historic memories artificially reawakened: it is from life itself, and not from a dead past, that a living cult can emerge . . . There are no immortal gospels, and there is no reason to believe that humanity is henceforth incapable of conceiving new ones. (Durkheim: 1912, ET 2001, 322–3)

Unlike Comte, who welcomed the death of religion, and Marx, who predicted its imminent demise accompanying the workers' revolution, Durkheim concluded that the secularizing tendencies of the nineteenth century were socially problematic rather than indicative of the triumph of enlightenment. For Durkheim, the enemy of social cohesion and religion alike was excessive individualism. Although industrial society generated mutual interdependence within a much larger circle of people, where this failed to be recognized, individualism tended to become overstated at the expense of the communal, self-obsessed and socially divisive.

Durkheim's (1897, ET 2002) comparative study of rates of suicide in Western Europe developed this thesis. While most studies of suicide had concentrated on the psychological distress of the individuals who contemplated taking their own life, Durkheim identified varying levels of suicide in

different countries, which enabled him to ask what social factors made suicide more likely. He concluded that the more embedded someone was within social networks, the less likely they were to commit suicide. Durkheim found that Roman Catholic countries had lower rates of suicide, which indicated that this form of religion was more conducive to social cohesion.

Inevitably, Durkheim's conclusions, loaded with his own prioritization of communal religion, can be contested. For example, can religion be shown to be the primary determinative factor? Do the long, dark winters of northern Europe have an impact? What of other variables, such as urbanization? What are the societal implications of the Roman Catholic designation of suicide as a mortal sin? Could this moral position dissuade some individuals from taking their life and dissuade some devout authorities from recording a definitive verdict of suicide that would necessarily be understood to combine social stigma for the bereaved and eternal implications for the deceased?

Notwithstanding these reservations, Durkheim's account of the interconnection of Protestantism and Western individualism can be built upon in the following sequence of conclusions:

1. Individualism diminishes the experience of social cohesion.
2. Individualism diminishes the practice of communal religion.
3. Protestantism elevates the individual and legitimates individualism.
4. Protestantism thereby diminishes social cohesion and the practice of religion.
5. The unintended consequences of Protestantism are the growth of individualism, the decay of social cohesion and the decline of religion.
6. Protestantism may therefore in the long-term become sociologically non-viable, subverting its own religious intentions by functioning as an accidental agent of secularization.

For Durkheim, in summary, Protestantism was intrinsically secularizing and had given birth to an excessive individualism that was heralding the death of the Christian God and a diminished sense of collective identity and morality. However, the necessary social function of religion in performing the communal meant that new forms of public and civil religion could be expected to rise to prominence.

Weber (Gerth and Wright Mill: 1991) similarly concluded that religion was experiencing an age of inevitable decline. For Weber, the triumph of rationality resulted in a society dominated by bureaucratic systems. To sum up the experience of life inside the 'iron cage' of rationalistic bureaucracy, Weber borrowed from Schiller the phrase 'the disenchantment of the world'. Where

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explanations of the human condition had formerly been in religious categories that had seemed self-evident, modernity was coming to frame human existence, just as self-evidently to cultural insiders, without reference to God. Religion was being diminished from an all-encompassing, defining and binding authority to a narrow and specialized domain.

There is in Weber something wistful about his understanding of the human condition. A parallel can be drawn with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. For these Christian Oxford dons and their fellow Inklings, the world was no longer enlivened with the mythological wonder of antiquity. Creatures of fable were still part of the world of Narnia, but in the age of Tolkien's 'fellowship of the ring' the elves were already departing from Middle Earth. However, while Durkheim anticipated a return of religion as a necessary expression of social cohesion, albeit with new gods, for Weber modernity had brought about a momentous disruption of the interconnections of religion and society. He proposed a bifurcation, in which the Academy was the place for the social scientific study of religion, utilizing what Berger (1967) later and aptly termed 'methodological atheism'. For those who still longed for religion's capacity to confer meaning, solace and identity, Weber assured them that the old religion continued to extend its welcome. Weber committed himself to the sociological study of religion while considering himself 'unmusical' in terms of any personal religious adherence and practice.

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations . . . To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times . . . the arms of the old churches are open widely and compassionately for him . . . religious return stands higher than the academic prophecy, which does not clearly realize that in the lecture-rooms of the university no other virtue holds but plain intellectual integrity. (Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' Gerth and Wright Mill: 1991f, 155–6)

For Weber, the social narrative of the rise of rationality, and hence bureaucracy, was also repeated in the dynamics of religious evolution ('The Sociology of Charismatic Authority' Gerth and Wright Mill: 1991). While the founder of a religion may have exceptional charisma, sooner or later every sect that survives its founder's death must evolve systems of religious organization. For Weber this represented the 'routinization of charisma', the inevitable transition in which, in order to sustain their founder's religious insights, successors in

leadership must employ different methods, moving from charisma to bureaucracy. Berger (1967) built upon Weber by observing that different denominations, utilizing different titles and official ecclesiologies, all gravitate in time towards a bureaucratic homogeneity of management styles and discourse. Charisma is necessarily supplanted by bureaucratic organization, and inspiration by institution.

It is not difficult to interpret the Pauline correspondence in the New Testament in Weberian terms. In the early days of his apostolic ministry, Paul emphasized that his own calling was direct from God, and not subject to human approval (Gal. 1.11–24). Likewise, he affirmed the egalitarian nature of the new Christian community, in which all were empowered by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12) and the former social distinctions of race, class and gender were made obsolete (Gal. 3.28). However, the later pastoral epistles, which seek to consolidate the Pauline mission in the form of sustainable churches, switch from charismatic leadership to official appointment (Tit. 1.5), from spontaneous charismatic endowment to ordained offices (2 Tim. 1.6), and circumscribe more explicitly and narrowly the ministries of women (1 Tim. 2.9–15). From a Weberian perspective, this represents an entirely typical and even predictable instance of the routinization of charisma. In order to sustain itself beyond the first flush of charismatic enthusiasm, a religious organization transitions its preferred leadership style in favour of bureaucratic order.

Weber was highly critical of Marx. He considered him a pioneer in the study of the interaction between religion and society, whose work was severely flawed by oversimplification. For Weber, the forces of social interaction between religion and society were immensely complex and worked in both directions. At times religion is shaped by social forces, at others religion reconfigures the society in which it operates. Thus, Weber argued that the rise of capitalism was an ‘unintended consequence’ of calvinistic Protestantism’s ‘this-worldly asceticism’ (Weber: 1904–5, ET 1958). Affirming non-ecclesial vocations, moderation in life’s pleasures and the demonstration of predestined salvation through works of service rather than pious devotion, Protestantism, according to Weber, gave new sanction to the priorities of capitalism. In due course, this spin-off from the Reformation outgrew dependence upon its religious precursor, and so religion gave birth to an essentially post-religious (at least in its European configurations) economic rationality.

With penetrating explorations of the dynamic interaction of religion and culture, the degradation of charisma into bureaucratic institutions, secular capitalism and individualism and commodified religion as unintended

consequences of the rise of Protestantism, Weber provided enduring, fertile and provocative insights for the study of religion in the twenty-first century. I consider him the single most important genius of the sociological imagination in the sub-discipline of sociology of religion.

1.4 Further socio-cultural dynamics of secularization

While Durkheim emphasized individualism and Weber rationality and capitalism, both considered social forces to have had a profound impact upon the authority, influence and public plausibility of religion. Specifically, they identify a causal interaction between the processes of modernization and the decline of religion. This causal nexus was pivotal for the subsequent development of secularization theory, in which it was assumed that this inverse relationship between modernity and religion, self-evident to many Western European intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was inevitable. Secularization theory rapidly became not only a descriptive account of how European modernity had a negative impact upon European Christianity, but also a prescriptive theory in which, at least in its most emphatic formulations, a universal and homogeneous process of modernization has an inevitable necessarily negative impact upon the significance and influence of religion in all its forms (Wilson: 1966; 1982; Bruce: 1995; 1996; 2002).

Later secularization theorists retained Durkheim and Weber's emphases upon individualism and rationalization. They argued that these social forces were more profoundly and determinately corrosive of the practice and plausibility of religion than the secularizing processes of high culture – whether Kant and Hegel or Marx and Darwin. Two further dominant emphases were the rise of social differentiation and pluralism.

Functional differentiation describes the cultural transposition to a society in which we expect specialists to speak with authority specifically and solely within their designated field of expertise. This represents a dramatic and irreversible shift from a unified world, in which the priest was the source of authority in the parish, theology was the queen of the sciences in the medieval university and the church presumed the power to adjudicate the legitimacy of scientific enquiries and the validity of scientific conclusions. As a consequence of this profound cultural transition, religious leaders are therefore demoted from a position of universal and public authority to functioning with one kind of specialist expertise among many. Stripped of its regulatory function,

religion is pushed towards the private domain, as an optional activity for the individual, with no jurisdiction in other spheres of life. Functional differentiation therefore results in the marginalization of religion, no longer endowed with an all-encompassing authority or even relevance in the worlds of science, business and politics.

Christian leaders can readily misdiagnose this dislocation from public life. Some have interpreted it as a deliberate policy of exclusion by those opposed to religion. Others have tended to blame the church for an implicit Platonism that reinforces a body-spirit, sacred-secular divide. The reality, according to secularization theory, is that this gradual freeing of sectors and specialisms from religious control is a logical consequence of the processes of modernization. It requires neither a conspiracy by secularists, nor a conceptual failure or a narrowly spiritual preoccupation on the part of the church. Rather, as diverse specialisms have emerged, it is only right and appropriate that they become freed from religious domination, given that church leaders – clergy, bishops and cardinals – lack expertise in these various fields. The result has often been a tendency towards dogmatic and authoritarian or bumbling and amateur interventions by the church in non-religious domains. Consider the inept and platitudinous contribution of several bishops in commentary on the credit crunch. A reaction is inevitable against well-meaning but ill-informed intrusion of the church into fields where it lacks expertise, and this further intensifies the subsequent marginalization of the church. The consequence is not only to legitimate diverse authorities within diverse specialisms, but to diminish the credibility and authority of the church in public life, beyond the domain of private religion.

Pluralism represents a further aspect in which, according to classical secularization theory, Protestantism has tended to undermine its own socio-cultural viability. Weber produced an ideal type categorization of one ‘church’ and proliferating ‘sects’. ‘Church’ signifies the established, official, majority religion. It is the inherited religion of birth. The ‘sects’ represent the alternative, dissenting, more demanding religions of decision that are entered by conversion. We should note in passing that this sociological use of the term ‘sect’ was intended to be descriptive rather than pejorative, even though in everyday parlance, rather than academic terminology, ‘sect’ implies a sectarian divisiveness, exclusivity and narrow-mindedness. These value judgments were not intrinsic to Weber’s ideal type.

In their origins, these various forms of Christian religion held a common assumption that can be traced back as far as Cyprian and Augustine – *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church). Different churches

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were more or less sole providers of assured salvation that was not available – or at least not reliably available – elsewhere. Rival churches therefore conceived themselves to be uniquely legitimate. For the official church, in an argument Augustine originally developed against the Donatists, a breakaway and strict church that questioned the willingness to compromise with the state authorities of many Catholic clergy, this entailed the right to legal sanctions to enforce conformity. For dissenters, this meant a refusal to conform and an insistence upon the need, indeed the urgency, of providing opportunities for the personal conversion of participants in the official church, who would thereby be recruited to their voluntarist variant of the Christian religion. Neither saw the other as fully legitimate co-religionists. This impasse is still evident in contemporary Latin America, where Pentecostalism is growing rapidly and sees no problem with recruiting converts from Catholicism (Cox: 1996; Martin: 1998; Martin: 2002; Anderson: 2004), and where the present Pope, with an equally monopolistic soteriology, described Pentecostalism in 2007 as the greatest danger to the Roman Catholic Church. Rival Jerusalems continue in strident conflict, but no longer in Western Europe.

The religious wars that engulfed Europe after the Reformation were referred to with great distaste by the immensely influential empirical philosophers John Locke (1632–1704) and David Hume (1711–76). For Locke (1870, written 1689–93), they demonstrated the importance of his emphasis upon mutual toleration. For Hume (1993), as he argued in *The Natural History of Religion*, first published in 1757, and in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, first published in 1779, they signified the irrational and untenable excesses of religion. In the concluding sentences to his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume threw off the cloak of scepticism and was forthright in his dismissal of Christian metaphysics, finding it bereft of empirical grounding or rigorous analytical reasoning:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. (Hume: 2000 (1748), 123)

In time, mutually exclusive claims to sole salvific legitimacy proved unsustainable. One of the early contributors to Protestant ecumenism was George Whitefield (Whitefield: 1960; Stout: 1991), who was threatened with a Church Court for preaching in dissenters' chapels. This new mood of collaboration

slowly prevailed, and this is characteristically described by secularization theorists as the transition from a single church and rival sects to mutual recognition as denominations.

Although from a theological perspective ecumenism would usually be seen as a highly virtuous endeavour, in accordance with Jesus' high priestly prayer that his followers would be as one (Jn. 17), secularization theorists identify profound but unintended negative consequences (Wilson: 1966; Bruce: 2002). By downplaying their distinctive salvific claims, denominations move into a pluralistic arena. Choosing a denomination becomes increasingly a matter of personal choice, with little or no salvific significance. Pluralism is therefore considered to be doubly damaging. First it results in unsavoury instances of prejudice, bigotry and religious rivalry. Second, as the plural providers become more moderate, moving from exclusivity to partnership, specific patterns of religious participation that were once determinate of eternal salvation or perdition are relativized and become a matter of individual preference. Either way, alienating the high-minded through schismatic rivalries or relegating their distinctive convictions to matters of ecclesiastical or theological taste, the impact of pluralism is, according to European perspectives within classical secularization theory, severely prejudicial to the viability of religion.

Building upon classical secularization theory, Peter Berger developed an elegant account of the negative consequences of religious pluralism in terms of the dissolution of the 'sacred canopy' (1967). This, he argued, was the all-encompassing framework of shared religious and ethical assumptions under which a society with a single church functioned effectively. The eruption of alternative and rival forms of Christianity was inevitably considered intolerable from under the sacred canopy, but in time the pluralistic forms prevailed, with the inevitable consequence that the sacred canopy was fractured and eventually fragmented beyond repair. For Berger the rise of pluralism '*ipso facto* plunges religion into a crisis of credibility' (1967, 151). Once again, the cultural transition – from uniformity to proliferating choices – and the religious transition – from a single church to a plurality of denominations – are seen to combine in an irretrievable decline in religiosity.

The 'plausibility structure', in Berger's terms, of a single and authoritative religious provider, is undermined and relativized by religious choice, whether that is articulated as rival sects or mutually recognized denominations. Religious pluralism leads ineluctably to religious relativism, with secularizing consequences. According to the argument Berger developed at that time, and later rescinded, Protestant pluralism therefore represented another instance of

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Weber's (1904–5, ET 1958) 'law of unintended consequences' in which Protestantism's fissile tendencies subvert conversionist aspirations with secularizing results. This analysis of the impact of Protestant pluralism has become deeply contested by contemporary sociologists of religion, particularly with reference to the North American free market economy of religions, where proliferating choice appears to sustain rather than subvert relatively high levels of religiosity, church attendance and religio-political engagement. Nonetheless for most of the twentieth century, and above all within the European orthodoxy of classical secularization theory, it was understood to be an assured conclusion of rigorous scholarship, with universal applicability that pluralism necessarily undermines religious vitality by diminishing the credence of all varieties of religion.

Of course, with the rise of global immigration and global media in the late twentieth century, religious pluralism took on a new totality: the cultural and sometimes ethnic contingency of religious identities heightened relativistic awareness and scepticism before the absolutist claims of any religion to provide the only means of salvation. It is not unreasonable to suggest that there was also a connection between the rise of a newly outspoken and campaigning atheism (Dawkins: 2006; Beattie: 2007; Hitchens: 2007; Stenger: 2009) and the impact upon all religions of 9/11. With sudden, brutal and archetypal impact, the destruction of the twin towers indicated that religion could yet function in late modernity as a malevolent and destructive force, inimical to the principles of legitimated diversity and mutual tolerance. Tarnished by the fanatical and the anaemic, plural religions become doubly subject to marginalizing relativism, even among those who find the new atheists too strident, even too evangelical.

Berger's account of how Protestant pluralism shattered the sacred canopy also includes an intriguing suggestion that the secularization of Western society began in the Old Testament (see also Wilson: 1982 and Weber: 1991). Berger argues that ethical monotheism, particularly as expressed by the Hebrew Prophets, removed from the ancient world a pantheon of gods and goddesses (Berger: 1967). When the prophets argue not merely that worship should only be directed to the Living God, but, more bluntly, that the many rituals and idols of the Jews' neighbouring peoples are worthless and mere superstitions, because their gods do not exist, the 'disenchantment of the world' has already begun. Berger thereby pushes the secularizing process back much further, not merely as a consequence of modernization, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nor as an indirect and unintended consequence of the rise of Protestantism, but grounded in the early articulations

of monotheism, Jewish, Christian and Islamic. Wilson drew a similar conclusion about the long receding tide of supernatural religion, arguing not only that secularization is a much broader and longer process than dechristianization, but also that Christianity, in diminishing the religiosity and superstitions of former pagans, has itself, as Weber intimated, been an 'secularizing agency' (Wilson: 1982, 150).

Robin Gill (1993; 2003) identified an additional nineteenth century factor that compounded later perceptions of church decline. In the second half of that century, continued and ambitious church building programmes, both by Anglicans and by the free churches, were no longer accompanied by the growth in church attendance enjoyed in the first half of the century. As a result, churches were built that would never be filled with the faithful. When the tide of church attendance turned, these excessive buildings exaggerated the scale of subsequent decline, which then reinforced the narrative of secularization. Once again we trace an unintended consequence, this time as a result of misplaced and excessive religious optimism.

The late twentieth century saw further factors compound the marginalization of religion. Increasing social mobility diminished any residual sense of religious participation as an expression of belonging within a local community, whether geographical or as part of an extended family. As Wilson observed, when the local community dies, religion declines with it (1982, 153–62). Moreover, late twentieth century transformations in Britain of recreation and shopping on Sundays turned church services from the only 'event in town' to one activity among many. Churches showed little comprehension of the need to adjust their activities in response to a competitive recreational market on Sundays. Sundays also became a time when divorced and separated parents without custody of their children often took care of them for the day. The decline of lifelong marriage and the rise of living together doubtless caused some couples to stay away from church and decide not to have their children baptized, suspecting that churches would only welcome conventional nuclear families. The increasing number of children born outside marriage has inevitably contributed to the dramatic decline in the number of children being baptized, as has the rising tide of individualism that has produced a disinclination to impose a 'religion of birth' on Western post-Christian children.

A further and profound late twentieth century transition has been a move away from the church's accustomed and once unassailable role as guardian of society's morality; the sacred canopy also constructed an ethical canopy. From the 1960s, particularly as a result of feminist and gay critiques that charged

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churches, not unreasonably, with patriarchy and homophobia, a reversal of ethical polarities occurred in Western Europe. Those who rejected Christian morality, far from considering themselves to be immoral or amoral, increasingly claimed a higher moral ground. This was symbolized when the gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell interrupted the Easter Sunday sermon of Archbishop George Carey at Canterbury Cathedral (Easter Sunday, 12 April 1998). Tatchell charged Carey with support for anti-gay legislation. This was not so much an act of assertive atheism as a claim that the church's morality had been judged and found wanting. Tatchell was later found guilty of indecent behaviour in a church under the 1860 Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act, and was penalized with a token fine of £18.60. Even in law, the moral supremacy of the church was implicitly undermined.

For classical secularization theory, these four social processes – individualism, rationalism and bureaucracy, structural differentiation and religious pluralism – combine to produce the diminishing significance of religion in the context of modernization. The most robust, contemporary defence and elaboration of the classical theory is delivered by Steve Bruce (1995; 1996; 2002). His arguments are beguiling, whether he convinces students and scholars of the secularization thesis in full or only in part: the common experience of my students is that initially Bruce carries all before him, like a first-rate lawyer, and only later do his readers begin to wonder whether the case he argues is almost too watertight, or even one-sided. He certainly provides an uncompromising account of the increasing marginalization of the church that shatters the pious optimism (or perhaps denial) still found in some church reports. While liberals blame evangelicals and evangelicals blame liberals, and one well-meaning church initiative follows its predecessors into oblivion, the church attendance data have continued to report unremitting decline. For Bruce (2007), this is not because Christian faith has become intellectually untenable, but because religious faith and practice have become for an increasing majority, particularly among younger generations, matters of indifference, even irrelevance, in the modern world. The crisis of secularization, in other words, is driven by socio-cultural change, and is not primarily cognitive.

By the late twentieth century, in a society where it seemed increasingly 'odd' to attend church, to take religion seriously or to defend traditional Christian morality, what had emerged, at least in nascent form, was nothing less than a secular canopy. The self-evident, normative assumptions of public and professional life are essentially post-religious. It is not just Alistair Campbell,

chief spin doctor to Tony Blair, who can take it for granted that ‘We don’t do God.’ The disenchantment of the world therefore now appears almost complete, and with surprising rapidity, over just half a century or so of post-religious cultural revolution the secular canopy has prevailed. Weber’s ‘iron cage’ has apparently shut fast upon the inhabitants of modernity’s rationalist bureaucracy, and there is little evidence of the emergence of Durkheim’s ‘new gods’.

1.5 Secularization theory and the marginality of religion

Leading exponents of classical secularization theory include Bryan Wilson (1966; 1982; 1998) and Steve Bruce (1995; 1996; 2002). They both consider the theory has identified factors within modernization that are irreversibly determinative of the future non-viability of religion, at least in Europe. Wilson (1966) argued that religious revivals confirm secularizing trajectories; they arise in contexts where religious influence has been diminishing, they contribute to the privatization of religion, the religious intensity they esteem highly is both individualistic and unsustainable and they depend upon a shared context of religious assumptions (in Berger’s (1967) terms a ‘sacred canopy’) such that revival becomes an increasingly unlikely prospect as a dominant religious framework continues to decline. Wilson (2003) concurred with Durkheim that there was an historical connection between religion and social cohesion. He saw a declining sense of moral consensus as the logical consequence of the decline of religion. However, unlike Durkheim, Wilson (1966; 1982) saw no realistic opportunities within the confines of secularization for the emergence of socially significant new gods.

Wilson identified five major arguments marshalled against the secularization thesis, and for each he proposed a robust rebuttal. First, critics of secularization claim that any account of a ‘golden age’ of religion from which there has been long-term attrition is claimed to be no more than a myth (1998, 53). Wilson riposted that the ‘myth of the golden age’ typically confuses secularization with de-Christianization (1998, 56). Citing high levels of superstition and recourse to supernatural explanations and assistance in the medieval period, notwithstanding bishops complaints of low levels of specifically Christian piety, Wilson concluded that, ‘if we take faith in the supernatural in general, rather than in Christianity in particular, we may

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readily conclude that the contention that “there was never an age of faith” collapses’ (1998, 56).

Second, critics identify rising levels of religiosity in the United States, which is the ‘most advanced of modern societies’ (1998, 54). Wilson notes that this approach narrows the debate to dechristianization, and that patterns of church attendance, church membership and the levels of Christian baptisms, marriages and funerals are no more than symptomatic of the wider decline of the significance of religion in the social system. He argues that a society could become more secularized in its organizing principles for public life, and yet church attendance could simultaneously increase. Wilson notes that church attendance is not a ‘unitary cultural phenomenon’, and so it may have markedly different socio-cultural significance in different societies, or within a single society in different generations. Moreover, he argues that church attendance in a wide variety of denominations functions entirely differently to attendance at a single unitary church in western Europe, whether Roman Catholic or State Protestant. Wilson therefore rejects the legitimacy of utilizing the statistical data of church attendance to confirm or refute any aspect of secularization theory. This sceptical position has not been found persuasive on either side of the debate, notably by Bruce (2001a; 2002) or Stark (Finke and Stark: 1992; Stark: 1999). Wilson’s case is overstated, as was his earlier assertion, for which he provided no supporting data, that ‘in America secularizing processes appear to have occurred *within* the church, so that although religious institutions persist, their specifically religious character has become steadily attenuated’ (1982, 152).

Third, critics point to the rise of new religious movements, in Christian, Eastern, new age and ‘human potential’ forms, some of which have rapidly achieved global recognition (1998, 54). Wilson argues these movements are small and therefore marginal to the majority Western indigenous population. They hold a light or tenuous hold on adherents. Moreover, many forms of new age and human potential express what they claim to offer in scientific and rationalist categories, and so they are ‘thoroughly congruent with the rationalized, and hence secularized, procedures of the modern Western world’ (1998, 59). Wilson’s argument is characteristically forceful, and yet the inadmissibility of any evidence to the contrary, and therefore the exclusion of any possibility that the mutations of religion may result in mutations in secularization or even post-secularization, risks making his argument appear somewhat polemical, selective and one-sided. Although he proposes arguments that dismiss the counter-evidence, the exclusion of any possibility of such evidence or of any new modifications or refinements in the processes of secularization raises the

prospect that Wilson's arguments are predetermined and theory-driven more than evidence-based.

Fourth, the rising tide of fundamentalism across the world's religions as a 'counter movement to modernization' is considered by critics to demonstrate that rationalized secularity has not achieved hegemonic dominance (1998, 54–5). Wilson defines fundamentalism as the assertion that the 'original teachings of a faith (or what are claimed as original teachings) are literally true and timelessly valid' (1998, 59–60). He then utilizes several arguments to demonstrate the marginality of hyper-conservative religion. First he claims that most instances are from the developing world, whereas secularization is primarily a process and condition of the developed world. Second, the social function of fundamentalism is the defence of a received culture that is threatened by processes of globalization and modernization: religion is utilized as a means of defending and absolutizing 'cultural, ethnic, national, or ethical values' that are essentially extrinsic to the religious frame (1998, 60). However loud the clamour, the ostensible claim for the priority of religion is not borne out by the ethnocentric orientation of such movements, in which religion is ultimately secondary. Third, fundamentalism is a reaction against the felt experience of secularization, both within the wider cultural locale and within the specifically religious context. Its upsurge is therefore nothing less than an evidence of the rising tide of secularization. Moreover, militant fundamentalism, rather than defending religious priorities with religious activities, characteristically and paradoxically utilizes rationalized and secular procedures: terrorist atrocities are therefore indicative of a reaction against secularization by those who are already secularized, rather than an unmodernized religious response confident in the supremacy of religious actions of piety and generosity. Far from being symptomatic of the possible overturn of the secularizing revolution, fundamentalism is a symbol of religion's marginalization.

Fifth, critics point to the persistent political vigour of Christian churches in the collapse of communism, notably in Poland and East Germany (1998, 55). However, Wilson argues from the Polish example that this represents a unique set of circumstances for the Roman Catholic Church, rather than a post-secularizing trend from which generalizations can be made that are applicable in other contexts. Thus, Poland has long been surrounded by non-Catholic countries – Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim – resulting in a long tradition of the mutual reinforcement of ethnic and religious identities. Then, under Soviet rule, the political elite was eliminated and political expression was denied. As a result, the priesthood was the 'only indigenous educated leadership

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stratum' and 'religion became surrogate politics' (1998, 61). However, Wilson argues, although the church became the defender of Polish national identity, this was actually a secularizing process, resulting in church leaders expressing concern that it might neglect its specifically religious functions. The public prominence of the church and yet its secularization could thus occur simultaneously.

Sixth and finally, Wilson identifies in order to rebut, critics argue that religion is 'acquiring a new public role', rather than being reserved entirely for the privatized sphere of personal religion and self-fulfilment, for example in campaigns against abortion and euthanasia and in defence of refugees (1998, 55). Wilson concedes that although the clergy have lost 'their old social status and the legitimizing functions which they once performed for the state, the clergy have not abandoned their role as commentators on social affairs' (1998, 62–3). However, he refutes the claim that this represents religion resisting privatization and returning to the public sphere. First, he argues, there is no unanimity among clergy on politicized moral issues, and those who do so are a minority. Second, the extent is unclear to which those clergy who are heard genuinely have the support of the laity or the church hierarchy. Third, Wilson claims that the rising stridency of social comment by clergy coincides with declining church attendance. Rather than evidence of a new confidence and assertiveness with which religion is returning to the public square, Wilson therefore interprets this activity as clergy in search of a cause, facing a crisis of confidence in the relevance and viability of Christianity in the western world (1998, 63).

Having repudiated to his own satisfaction the critics of the secularization thesis, Wilson identifies four indicators of what appears to be conceived as a unilinear process of the marginalization and privatization of religion (1998, 64). First, the formal endorsement of a particular religion by the state tends to diminish. Second, there is an erosion of religion's status as the provider of the normative moral framework of society. Third, the proportion of national expenditure devoted to specifically religious causes diminishes over time. And fourth, other institutions – governmental, financial, educational, political – with a secular frame of reference take over responsibilities previously understood to be within the domain of state-sponsored religion. For Wilson, ineluctably secularizing processes of structural change affect all modernizing societies. Nonetheless, he does not conclude that this means the extinction of religion. Stripped of the public function of legitimizing the political establishment, experiencing a 'steady diminution of affluence and influence' (1998, 62) a decline in adherents and an ageing 'cadre of trained

officials', the churches nonetheless have formidable resources of 'well-distributed plant'. For Wilson, secularization in the public sphere does not necessarily mean the end of religion in the private sphere, even though the religious must now compete in the private with other providers of meaning, mystery and consolation, from psychotherapists to the movies.

. . . long after the part that religion had once played in the activities of more specialised social institutions had diminished or altogether vanished, the likelihood was that religion might persist as an agency providing various functions for individuals . . . however, religion is today one choice among many. (Wilson: 1998, 62)

Bruce (2002; 2007) similarly argued that neither new religious movements nor New Age spiritualities provide any significant shift in the secularizing trajectories of modernity: they are peripheral activities, making no significant conceptual or participative impact upon the majority culture; new religious movements either die out or enter into the normal secularizing patterns of individual and private religion; and New Age spiritualities are commodified lifestyle choices, predominantly for middle aged women of the baby boomer generation, with no public or enduring consequences. In sum, even though Bruce claims his approach is not prescriptive, no upsurge in religion, Christian or other, can make a significant difference in the face of secularization's juggernaut. His prediction is stark and definite: 'Britain in 2030 will be a secular society' (Bruce: 2003, 60).

Quite clearly and undeniably, something seismic has happened to the condition of religion in the context of modernization in Western Europe. Secularization theory claims to provide nothing more than the most cogent theoretical explanation for these processes. Four substantive questions therefore arise. First, is secularization theory descriptive and specific to the European context, or prescriptive, whether in part or in full, and universally applicable to the condition of all religions in the context of modernization? Second, in the European context does secularization theory most plausibly articulate the decline of religion in general or of Christianity in particular? Third, with reference to Christianity, does secularization theory argue for the demise of Christendom, of public religion at least in its traditional forms, or of Protestantism as the unintentional promoter of secularity, whether established or non-conformist or both? Fourth, is secularization a unidirectional socio-cultural process, or can it be conceived, in any of its dimensions, to be reversible?

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