Stream: Political Secularism and Religious Difference in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa

Title: 'Re-thinking religious change in Europe: Religion at the End of the Social'

Author and affiliation: Paul-François Tremlett, The Open University

Introduction
Debate in the sociology of religion about religious change in Europe have been dominated by the ‘secularization thesis’ and those who have argued, from survey and census data, that European societies are experiencing an irreversible decline in religious affiliation and participation (see Wilson 1982; Bruce 2002). Critics have claimed variously that this linear model of religious decline should be replaced by an oscillation model of religious change (Stark and Bainbridge 1987) or that the data used to support the secularization thesis fails to account for the emergence of new, liquid religions and spiritualities characterised by forms of horizontal transmission and association (Taves and Kinsella 2013; Wanless 2016). In this paper, I focus in particular on these latter, ad hoc and liquid religiosities and spiritualities, to argue that they mark neither the end nor the resurgence of religion but rather "the end of the social" (2007: 51) as predicted by Jean Baudrillard. According to the linear model of secularization, these liquid spiritualities are the last gasp of religion but, if Baudrillard is right, then their sociological significance lies elsewhere. This re-framing offers an opportunity to re-think the secularization thesis in postmodern terms, terms in which time is no longer understood as “progressive” or in terms of “evolution”—now it is seen as having not merely “slowed down” but entered “a phase of contraction in which whole new series of laws apply: a society in a phase of inward implosion” (Gane 1991: 130; see also Best and Kellner 1991: 120-121).

The sociology of secularization
The secularization thesis is the most important and debated sociological model of religious change in the sociology of religion in the West. There are a number of variants of the main model, including counter theories of religious oscillation and religious resurgence (for a general overview, see Warner 2010). Opponents of the strong thesis of terminal religious decline point out that while church attendance figures are down in
many West European countries, absence from church does not necessarily mean unbelief. To coin the sociologist Grace Davie’s phrase, people may believe even while they have ceased to belong to any particular parish or congregation (Davie 1994). Secondly, they note big changes in the global religious landscape including the huge growth of Christianity, particularly in its Pentecostal and charismatic forms, in the global south (Martin 2005). However, in this section I refer firstly to the main model that, on the basis of analyses of church attendance figures and attitudinal surveys about religious belief, predicts a linear line of religious decline based on the assumption that religious beliefs and practices cannot remain widespread in societies where secular and scientific beliefs and practices are pervasive (Wilson 1982). Secondly, I refer to the oscillation model that, on the basis of a market model of religious provision, assumes that periods of secularization correlate with periods of religious market monopoly (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). Thirdly, I refer briefly to a Frankfurt School type model of religious resurgence which frames religion and the secular in terms of Weber’s opposition between disenchanted modernity—“there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play...rather...one can, in principle, master all things by calculation” (Weber 1991: 139)—and re-enchantment (see Tremlett 2011).

The linear model of religious change is associated, in the UK, primarily with the work of Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce.¹ Both—utilizing census and survey data—locate secularization with the advent of modernity (e.g. Bruce 2002: 2) and the emergence of the idea of the rational and autonomous individual who prefers horizontal attachments of democratic politics and culture to the vertical affiliations of religious institutions, and for whom religion becomes increasingly just one belief among many, in an increasingly plural world—a secularized marketplace of choices and opportunities. This is precisely the narrative that sociology’s classical tradition set in motion, at least in the Weberian

¹ Callum Brown’s historical account of “the death of Christian Britain” (2009: 1) is worth distinguishing from that of Wilson and Bruce to the extent that Brown outlines a theory of secularization based in oral historical research rather than statistics and survey data and for which the causes of secularization are cultural and highly gendered. According to Brown, the catastrophic decline of Christianity in Britain began in the 1960s with the rise of the counter-culture: if, prior to the 1960s, women had been the primary agents of religious transmission outside the churches, feminism, the pill and the sexual revolution put an end, over a very short period of time, not simply to the participation of women in the churches but to the transmission of Christian values, beliefs and practices to the next generation (Brown 2009: 175-180).
variant and its narrative of disenchantment (see Weber 2002). This sense of secularization as the inevitable unfolding of the process of rationalization as described by Weber is exemplified in Bryan Wilson's definition of secularization as the diminution in the social significance of religion. Its application covers such things as, the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies; the shift from religious to secular control of various of the erstwhile activities and functions of religion; the decline in the proportion of their time, energy and resources which men devote to super-empirical concerns; the decay of religious institutions; the supplanting, in matters of behaviour, of religious precepts by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria; and the gradual replacement of a specifically religious consciousness...by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation; the abandonment of mythical, poetic, and artistic interpretations of nature and society in favour of matter-of-fact description and, with it, the rigorous separation of evaluative and emotive dispositions from cognitive and positivistic orientations (Wilson 1982:149).

Importantly for Wilson and Bruce, the emergence of new religious and spiritual groups and movements, the proliferation of sects and ecumenical movements and so forth are, in the last analysis, confirmations of secularization in the sense that they are responses to a situation in which religious values have lost their sacred aura.

Against this linear model of religious decline, Stark and Bainbridge have proposed an oscillation model in which secularisation and resurgence are correlated with the rise and fall of religious markets, specifically religious monopolies defined by a single state provider and free market competition where numerous providers compete. Their modelling of a kind of religious economy characterized by cyclical processes of sectarianism and new religious innovation, presupposes free-market innovation versus state market stagnation, with the former generating greater religious commitment among what become, under state church monopolies, populations largely indifferent to religion:

Without coercion, the natural condition of the religious market is one of numerous competing faiths and organizations. But for the greatest part of recorded history, societies have been guided by dominant religions that have achieved near monopolies through serving the needs of the state and receiving coercive support in return (Stark and Bainbridge 1987: 316).

The oscillation model assumes that religious needs are constant and that religions provide 'supernatural compensators' to assuage those needs. Importantly, they argue that it is only when "the religious market is free enough to offer several brands of religion"
that the population "receives appropriate compensators and responds with firm religious commitment" (1987: 149).

Opposed to both of these models of secularization there is a corpus of scholarship that argues for a shift from religion to spirituality, a shift that is taken to represent a socially significant vehicle for religious resurgence in particular against the linear trajectory of secularization (for a general overview, see Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013). This approach also assumes the constancy of religious needs, which inevitably leak out from the confines of modernity's iron cage: Christopher Partridge's two-volume *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2004) and Paul Heelas' *Spiritualities of Life* (2008) are representative of the claim that Europe is in the midst of a cultured reaction against the "secularizing forces of rationalization, bureaucratization and technological domination" (Partridge 2004: 43). For Partridge, this relates to the emergence of a "new subculture of dissent and opposition" and a return "to a form of magical culture" he calls "occulture" (2004: 40). Heelas, by contrast, foregrounds the social significance of what he calls alternatively "experiential spirituality" (Heelas 2008: 5) and "inner-life spirituality" (2008: 219). These spiritualities lie on a "romantic trajectory" that is opposed to the instrumentalism of bureaucratic and capitalist modernity and allegedly offer a counterbalance to processes that threaten to suffocate the creative Self. According to Heelas, European lifestyles are "ever more regulated by legal, quasi-legal or economically justified procedures, rules, [and] systems" (2008: 2). For both Partridge and Heelas, secularizing reason deforms the human capacity for creativity and imagination and both oppose a stifling reason against a religio-spiritual awakening.

**Re-Thinking Secularization**

These different narratives of secularisation—and despite their different points of departure—have in common the fact that the secular and the religious are positioned as two opposite poles of a binary pair, tending towards the kind of conflict model over the terms of modernity and secularization advanced by Samuel Huntingdon (1993). Huntingdon predicted that cultural, civilizational and religious markers of identity would be the principal drivers of conflict in the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Empire:

> Civilizational identity will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic,
Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another (1993: 25).

Like Huntington, I begin from the pivotal events of 1989 but as a means of re-thinking the terms of secularization with a postmodern twist: with the fall of the Berlin Wall, I assume that the optimistic and thoroughly carbon-powered temporalities of communism and liberalism had exhausted themselves. History had run out of steam. In the sociology of religion, the theory most indebted to the teleological temporalities of modernity’s evolutionary optimism was the secularization thesis. The thesis predicted the terminal decline and eventual extinction of Christianity in Europe and religion more generally, eventually, under the corrosive effects of an endlessly modernizing modernity. What is perhaps only just becoming clear is that the error of the secularization thesis lay not in its prediction that religious populations and identifications would collapse, but that it failed to recognize that this was but one element of a wider process of exhaustion. It was not only religion that was in decline, everything else was as well: populations did not only stop attending church, they also stopped joining political parties and they stopped voting. Arguably, the situation now is one where the institutions of European modernity are failing, and once integrated populations are finding themselves forced to rely on their own resources and creative ingenuity to insulate themselves as best they can from the worst excesses of predation by oligarchs, authoritarians and self-styled populists:

We are facing a long period of systemic disintegration, in which social structures become unstable and unreliable, and therefore uninstructional for those living in them. A society of this kind that leaves its members alone is...less than a society...a society devoid of reasonably coherent and minimally stable institutions capable of normalizing the lives of its members and protecting them from accidents and monstrosities of all sorts. Life in a society of this kind demands constant improvisation (Streeck 2016: 36).

Of course Streeck is not writing about religion: he is interested in the links between neoliberal capitalism and politics which he regards as being in a state of entropic disintegration. I would argue that the key observation of the secularization thesis—that there has been a dramatic decline in church attendance and religious belonging—is part of this same story of disintegration and exhaustion. Modernity—once characterized by endless growth and by the utopian productivist and evolutionist imaginaries of Marxism and liberalism is now contracting, and has become, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, “an opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all surrounding energy”, bringing to an
end “all those schemas of production, radiation and expansion according to which our imaginary functions” (Baudrillard 2007: 36-37). As such, the significance of the new, improvised and liquid religiosities and spiritualities needs to be re-thought beyond simplistic conceptions of religious decline or religious resurgence and creative re-enchantment.

**Religion at the End of the Social**

The sociology of the new spiritualities and religiosities has been positioned as a counter-argument to secularization that, on the basis that individual religious needs are constant, those needs will be met if not within institutional religious contexts and settings then outside them. For example, McGuire argues that individual religious practice is not a micro-version of “institutional religion” (2008: 185) to be understood on the basis of official doctrine. Rather, it is a fluid arena of social practice fabricated in *ad hoc* fashion from diverse religious, cultural, secular and political sources. Likewise, the theologian Kees de Groot has argued that liquid religion points to “the dissolution of institutionalized and organized religiosity” (2006: 92). Drawing from the sociology of Zygmunt Bauman (2000), de Groot’s concept of liquid religion is not only about the decline of what we might call ‘official’ or institutional religion, but also the growth of new, ‘unofficial’ forms of religious community, that combine different elements of religion, culture and the secular in new and unexpected ways (Groot 2008).

There are numerous examples of these new liquid, religious and spiritual forms, fabricated or blended from overlapping religious traditions alongside cultural and counter-cultural elements, technologies and secular-political strategies, from Islamic hip hop artists suturing together a poetic tradition with a contemporary form of music (see Nasir 2012), to death punk and drone metal bands suturing extreme sounds to mystical and esoteric imaginaries (see Coggins 2015). Baudrillard’s sociology has informed some of this work, notably through the work of Adam Possamai (2005) who has argued that new religions such as Discordianism, Matrixism and Jediism are hyper-real simulacrum of religion, “created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture” providing “inspiration at a metaphorical level” and/or “beliefs for everyday life” (2012: 20). These are examples not of eccentric outliers or ephemeral instances of cultural production: rather, they are indicators of attempts to build forms of association and solidarity in new ways and along new lines (see Tremlett 2013). This can be seen in the complex
intersections of indigeneity, the New Age, shamanism and tourism among contemporary Sami peoples in Norway (see Fonneland and Kraft 2013). In this example, the intersections of secular politics—conceptions of sovereignty, ethnic nationalism and indigenous rights—collide and collude with issues of development, culture and authenticity, which are in turn refracted through tourism, shamanism, Lutheran (i.e. Norwegian state Christianity) and the global New Age movement—revealing entanglements of religion and the secular that cannot be teased apart but rather suggest the attempt to construct new forms of sovereignty and solidarity in the ruins of the state. Similarly, the work by Rieger and Kwok to document the intersections of religion and dissent in the American Occupy movement, explores the organizational forms—the horizontal process—of the Occupy movement as a means of reflecting on the slow, institutional death of Christianity. They argue that "the old hierarchical models of the church seem outdated" and that in order to imagine an alternative it is necessary to draw not only from Christian theology but also from “organizational theory” (2013: 120). For Rieger and Kwok this is the point of bringing ‘religion’ and ‘Occupy’ together—to enable the emergence of an alternative imaginary for Christianity that moves away from the exhausted hierarchies of top-down power and towards a model of “decentralized networks” (2013: 121) defined by relationality and a rhizomatic or “heterogeneous organizational structure” (2013: 130) that was a key organizational feature of the Occupy movement (Graeber 2013). They deploy this alternative imaginary (of power and association) to define a “theology of the multitude” (2013: 6) and it is precisely in these decentralized, relational, rhizomatic types of association and transmission that Rieger and Kwok identify the potential future sources of religion and the social (2013: 40).

**Conclusions**

In this paper I have argued that the secularization thesis is implicated not in the end of religion but rather, pace Baudrillard, in the end of the social—at least as it is configured through the imaginary of modernity. This requires a re-thinking of the significance of the new, liquid and improvised religiosities and spiritualities beyond the idea of religious resurgence, creative re-enchantment or for that matter the confirmation of secularization and religious decline. At one level, this marks perhaps an attempt to privilege a Durkheimian rather than a Weberian sociology of religion, as have suggested that the significance of these new religious forms lies elsewhere as attempts by individuals
increasingly cut adrift as institutional and societal integrative functions breakdown, to manage their new vulnerability and exposure to various forms of predation (compare with Hefner 2010). At this stage I shall add some brief remarks about religious forms of fundamentalism that are of increasing concern to European populations. Arguably fundamentalism is also a response to the disintegrative forces identified by Baudrillard: it is an attempt to re-establish a centre that holds and one that spreads precisely through channels and networks opened out in the new entropic landscape of the end of the social. The only institutions that expand in these circumstances are those concerned with security, surveillance and control deployed not to protect publics from random acts of terror—because they cannot—but to protest elites from the consequences of their decision-making. The future is bleak indeed and yet perhaps the resilience of the social lies, as Durkheim indicated, in religion.
References


