

Religion's Changing Form and Relation to the State since 1989

Written by Linda Woodhead

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LINDA WOODHEAD, OCT 5 2015

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There is no longer any doubt that religion needs to be taken seriously as a factor in international relations. But a great deal of the discussion and representation of religion—including that in the media and politics—remains stuck in an outdated understanding of religion.

The argument I develop here and in other work is that the global religious landscape has changed dramatically since around 1989, at which point an emerging new paradigm or new style of religion became dominant and an older style of religion recessive.[1] What I refer to as 'old-style religion' dates back to the sixteenth century and was forged in the crucible of emerging nation-states. 'New-style religion' dates back to the late nineteenth century and has burgeoned in the context of the globalised market-based societies of the post-Cold War era.

I will outline some headline features of this transformation, and reflect briefly on factors facilitating and obstructing it. It is important to be clear that the transition I identify is not necessarily one from existing traditions of religion (like Islam or Christianity) to new and post-traditional forms (like New Age spirituality), but often a re-configuration *within* existing religions traditions (from old to new styles of Islam, Christianity, etc.). The outcome is a complex contemporary landscape in which old and new styles co-exist and compete.

Old-Style Religion and the Crucible of the Nation-State

It is generally accepted, but often forgotten, that state and religion were historically co-formed as inseparable parts of nation-state-building projects. Thus, in the West from the sixteenth century, new forms of church-based religion, both Catholic and Protestant, came into being which had the same set of defining characteristics as the emerging states they were so closely tied to.[2] Codification and 'confessionisation', the development of legal systems and constitutions, the textual statement of core beliefs, the consolidation of hierarchies of male power, the systematisation of religion-state relations and the organization of centralised bureaucracies were all part and parcel of the process. Superstitious 'accretions', popular practices, unsystematic and inefficient elements, appeals to tradition-as-authority, and overly feminised elements were excised in a process of purification and rationalisation.[3]

In this 'reformation' of religion and politics, religion sometimes had a leading role in the consolidation and control of national territory; the imposition of unity and uniformity of belief, values and language; economic rationalisation; the development of educational and legal systems. There were many struggles and confrontations between religion and state, but even more by way of the common pursuit of mutual interest. In the process, religious and political leaders came to resemble one another ever more closely, sitting in the same political chambers, rubbing shoulders in the same corridors of power and socialising in the same networks.

Indeed, as Michael Mann demonstrates in volume two of *The Sources of Social Power* and I argued more summarily

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in *Introduction to Christianity*, it was only through imitating and appropriating many aspects of religion, including wealth, that nation-states were able to grow and eventually vie with or eclipse religious bodies in power and influence.[4] The process was most definitive in relation to Protestant state churches, but even the supranational Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches eventually came to be state-regulated within national territories by control of property, creation of parallel systems of civil law, establishment of concordats and so on—though only definitively so in the second half of the twentieth century.

In this long process, religion formed in slightly but significantly different ways along with the differences between national and national-colonial contexts. Thus, 'Irish Catholicism', 'US Catholicism', 'Filipino Catholicism' and 'Mexican Catholicism', for example, developed as distinct variants. Non-Western religions rationalised in analogous ways, often under the impetus of internal reform movements. Some of these religio-national differences remain so significant that they still need to be referred to in order to make sense of, for example, different welfare-state regimes across Europe and different public and political stances towards resident Muslim populations.[5]

The Reason Why a Secularisation Perspective Became Dominant

By the latter part of the twentieth century, however, old-style religion had been so comprehensively domesticated by various nation-state constitutional arrangements that it was possible for political, academic and even religious elites to believe that it had been permanently privatised and denuded of political significance. Thus, as late as 1994 Henry Kissinger could write a book on *Diplomacy* that contains not a single entry for 'religion' in the index. A secularisation perspective became dominant.[6]

Brilliant men like Kissinger or Habermas could ignore religion because they stood at the end of the era in which state control of religion reached its apogee. They were able to overlook the continuing role of religion in the provision of welfare, healthcare, education and value-solidarities because these services had become so established and domesticated in the post-Second World War context that they had become invisible as religion. It is only when things don't fit in and won't lie down that they get noticed. In relation to religion, that is what has happened increasingly since 1989. In the process, a new style of religion has started to eclipse the old.

De-compartmentalisation

The striking feature of new-style religion with regard to its social location is its social de-differentiation or 'de-compartmentalisation'. [7] Religion has come out of the box. It has emerged again in public life in both old and new ways—across spheres of welfare, education, dispute settlement, healthcare, healing, entertainment, etc. This de-privatisation of religion has taken place in the context of ever-deepening urbanisation and ever-expanding commercialisation and marketisation/growth of consumer capitalism.[8]

This changed location and context of operation explains the eclipse of old- by new-style religion. Like other parts of the public sector, the latter is governed by committees and due process. Its pace is dictated by complex and slow decision-making procedures. It finds it hard to change course, be entrepreneurial and adapt to new opportunities. By contrast, new-style religion is more like a business enterprise or many start-up firms. It often develops from the grassroots (including from socially marginal groups), is fuelled by new spiritual resources and ideals, throws up new leaders all the time and is quickly adaptive to new opportunities. It draws on the unregulated energies of any number of women and men, who often act individually and unaccountably, taking advantage of the low start-up costs of religious enterprises and of opportunities provided by processes of globalisation and new media.

Even in a country like the UK where there is still an extensive and mainly well-functioning state-supervised healthcare and welfare system, there are many spaces for such religion to operate within. In relation to healthcare, for example, the growth of alternative and complementary forms of medicine that often have an explicitly spiritual dimension has been remarkable.[9] It is estimated that around 40 per cent of the population participate at some point in their lifetime.[10] This sphere has grown since the 1980s to constitute a major and indispensable part of the current health landscape today, without which the state-based National Health System would not be able to cope and which the latter increasingly acknowledges, despite some vociferous critics.

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This example shows that there are opportunities for new-style religion even where the state is relatively well-functioning and extensive. But where this is not the case, and where post-war dreams of reconstructed, newly independent secular national utopias have crashed, as in parts of North Africa and the Middle East, the opportunities are even greater. Consider, for example, the growth of mega-churches worldwide, many of which have de-compartmentalised to provide services which secular states have failed to provide as effectively—welfare, healthcare, old-age provision, childcare, counselling, legal advice, education and even housing. I have recently seen mega-churches in the Philippines building their own residential and worshipping communities on a vast scale—which they provide on market principles. This succeeds because more trust is placed in the market and these communities than in the state.

Such post-secular-utopian religious projects often ignore the state and grow in the context of the market. Many have few state-related political ambitions or claims to make. They neither go to the state for favours nor seek the alliances which characterised old-style religion. Indeed, what has recently been happening in countries like Nigeria and the Philippines is that government and politicians have had to turn to *them* for help and favours – whether securing votes and endorsements or finance, or using them to provide services for which the 'big state' was once thought responsible.[11]

Changing Religious Authority and Leadership

New-style religion is also bound up with the rise of new religious actors and authorities and the decline of old. Secularisation theory needs to be recast to take account of the fact that what we have been witnessing is not so much a *decline in religion* as a decline in traditional forms of *religious authority*, including traditional leaderships, scriptures and traditions. To imagine religion as defined by a founder, a set of scriptures, a hierarchical priestly leadership and a bounded set of traditions and rituals is now disastrously out of date.

In relation to leadership, striking confirmation is provided by the large surveys of adults aged 18+ in the UK that I carried out with survey company YouGov in 2014.[12] When asked where they take guidance from in living their life and making decisions, 0 per cent of people say 'religious leaders, local and national' (the figure rises to just 2 per cent if you allow the option of selecting four different authorities). Moreover, the figure is not necessarily higher amongst actively religious people: for example, 0 per cent of church-going Catholics say they take most guidance from their religious leaders.[13]

But the conditions which make it so hard for old religious authorities—priests, bishops, imams, rabbis, etc.—to retain their power are the perfect conditions for new religious actors. In a context of increased consumer and democratic choice, more extensive education and greater personal responsibility, many people are no longer willing to defer to higher authorities. Scandals and failures amongst traditional leaders do not help. New leaders have to be much more approachable, skilful and facilitating,

Invoking Max Weber, we can say that both traditional and bureaucratic modes of religious authority have been declining, whilst charismatic styles have been growing—while also insisting that the kind of spiritual charisma which succeeds today is one which facilitates and empowers others, rather than being authoritarian.[14] Such leadership is now eclipsing the older style, despite the fact that politicians prefer to have their photos taken with the latter. Their value has become symbolic.

Under the heading of changing authority, there is also more than can be explored here about the way in which religious structures and institutions have been changing. Suffice to say that the religious landscape since the 1980s has been characterised by the rise of new local, national and transnational religious networks that are closely related not only to migration and mobility but also to virtual social networks. The latter also connect people face to face on an occasional basis by way of large gatherings, festivals and pilgrimages—to Mecca, the Ganges, Lourdes and so on (all growing in popularity). Thus old-style national, territorialised and local neighbourhood-based forms of religion tend to decline, while globalised and partially virtual forms flourish. In terms of religious institutions, the maxi and the mini appear to be more successful than the midi.

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Thus, the most vital contemporary forms of religion grow in the context of the global market—or rather, many segmented markets. In religion, one size can no longer fit all. Universalising agendas like those of national churches that tried to impose common rituals and beliefs and create a commonwealth of resources are receding fast. In their place there is diversification into market niches that often run across nations or even continents.

This explains many recent developments, including the success of many forms of religion that are conservative in relation to gender roles and sexual ethics. They appeal to the vastly expanding global middle classes and speak to their concerns: blessing and supporting the pursuit of prosperity, helping people achieve it by building local and global networks of connection and support, upholding a stable nuclear family unit with male dominance along with growing female independence and respect for the dignity of children, encouraging consumption, and allowing for a great deal of direct personal religious participation without the mediation of old religious leaderships—hence concentration on personal relations with the divine and the experiences and benefits it brings.[15]

In this diversified religious world, however, progressive and radical forms of religion also flourish alongside more conservative ones. Thus, the decades since the 1980s have also witnessed the transnational growth and expansion of various forms of neo-pagan spirituality, often with strong feminist, egalitarian and ecological emphases. They have spawned a diversity of transnational networks, connections, literatures, and festivals, and they depend on local and personal initiatives and leaderships that often rise and fall rather rapidly.

These various kinds of niche religion do not just grow and promote themselves by their own efforts but are strengthened by marketing initiatives directed at them. Thus Reina Lewis, for example, shows how new entrants into the fashion target a global market of orthodox religious women from across different religious traditions who are all interested in modest forms of dress.[16] New religious publics are sustained and defined by being targeted as niche consumer groups.

Religious Diversity

A key feature of the contemporary religious landscape is therefore its sheer diversity. There is no one kind of religion that is doing well, and no overall trend—and no single theory can explain it all. Even in a nation-state context, there is now a bewildering proliferation and complexity, with rapid growth and decline of various religious leaders, groups, churches, networks, ideas, fashions, movements and so on.

Novelty becomes more important than ever before—just as in any other kind of consumer market. So new religious movements, phenomena and 'revivals' spring up and die down rapidly. A phenomenon like the Toronto blessing can spread like wildfire in charismatic Christian circles worldwide before fading away after only a few years. There then has to be an attempt by its sponsoring agency to replace it with something new – in this case the more New Age-influenced practice of 'soaking prayer'. [17]

Competition is a major driver. Rival religious leaders and entrepreneurs keep religion vital by innovating and diversifying and by identifying new consumer groups. Even the old-style religious institutions, alarmed by falling numbers and support, try to get in on the act—branding themselves with logos, carrying out market research, trying to get in touch with the views and needs of their potential audiences and investing in growth research and programmes. They begin to behave more like businesses than bureaucracies, albeit a bit late in the game.[18]

New-style religion does not replace old but exists side by side or in different sediments. And we are starting to witness a fightback of some old-style religious authorities. Their strategies include selective borrowing from new-style religions, attempts to protect and extend alliances with political power, and renewed efforts to attract members and funding. Some forms of old-style religion are also currently active in defending their interests under various slogans and initiatives (such as 'religious freedom' and 'inter-faith dialogue') and by attempts to defend the display of their symbols in public.[19] A consequence of this co-existence and competition of old- and new-style religion is a sharp and often aggressive tone in parts of the religious marketplace as various competing groups vie with one another.

Conclusion: Realities versus Representations of Religion

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This sketch of religious transformation must end with a paradox that I can only indicate and not explore. I have suggested that, since 1989, old-style religion has become recessive and new-style dominant. The irony is that most media and political representations of religion remain stuck in the old paradigm and blind to or dismissive of the new. The effect is to artificially support the former despite the fact that its support, vitality and political significance is dwindling. As a result, the full impact of the religious revolution that has been taking place is yet to be felt.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Tuomas Martikainen, Francois Gauthier and Erin Wilson.

[1] Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto, *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[2] Peter Beyer, '2011 Association for the Sociology of Religion Presidential Address. Socially Engaged Religion in a Post-Westphalian Global Context: Remodeling the Secular/Religious Distinction', *Sociology of Religion* 73:2 (2012), 109-129.

[3] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Edited and translated by Hans Gerth and C.Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

[4] Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 2. The Rise of Classes and Nation States 1760-1914* . 2nd edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Linda Woodhead, *An Introduction to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[5] Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). J. Fetzer and C.Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[6] Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion* (London: Sage, 2013).

[7] Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in a Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[8] Gauthier, Francois, Tuomas Martikainen and Linda Woodhead (eds) (2011) *Social Compass* 58(3) Special issue: *Religion in Consumer Society*. Francois Gauthier and Tuomas Martikainen, eds, *Religion in the Neoliberal Age: Modes of Governance and New Political Economy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). Francois Gauthier and Tuomas Martikainen, (eds), *Religion in Consumer Society: Brands, Consumers, Markets* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

[9] Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford, UK and Malden, USA: Blackwell, 2005).

[10] Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead, "Holistic Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47: 2 (2008), 259-276.

[11] Nancy Davis and Robert Robertson, *Claiming Society for God. Religious Movements & Social Welfare* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

[12] Linda Woodhead (2014) <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/>

[13] Linda Woodhead (2014) <http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WFD-Catholics-press-release.pdf>

[14] Max Weber, 'The Sociology of Charismatic Authority', in Gerth and Wright Mills, *Max Weber*, 245-252. See also Alp Arat, *Spiritual Charisma. Embodiment and Facilitation in Contemporary Practices of Meditation* (University of

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Lancaster, unpublished PhD thesis, 2013).

[15] See, for example, Özlem Sandikci, 'Researching Islamic marketing: past and future perspectives', *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 2:3 (2011), 246 – 258.

[16] Reina Lewis, *Modest Fashion. Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013).

[17] Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse, 'Pentecostal-Charismatic Prayer and Social Engagement', in Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead (eds), *Prayer in Religion and Spirituality. Vol 4, Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014) 221-242.

[18] Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[19] Lori Beaman, 'Battles over Symbols: The "Religion" of the Minority Versus the "Culture" of the Majority', *Journal of Law and Religion* 28:1 (2012), 67-104.

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