Understanding the New Visibility of Religion: Religion as Problem and Utility

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Abstract

This article examines recent debates about the 'return of religion' to the European public sphere. It argues that there is widespread confusion between religion being more visible and religion having more impact on contemporary societies. The article asks what the 'new visibility of religion' means, how religion is contested and renegotiated in the public arena – or rather, in different publics – and what the effects of these struggles are on society, state and religion itself. It does so by providing an analytical overview five distinct approaches to the new visibility of religion: desecularization, de-privatization and post-secularity; the effects of 'welfare utopianism' on public religion; religion as a social problem; religion as expedient; and the mediatization or publicization of religion. The article concludes that what we are witnessing is a 'secular return' of religion, where religion is relevant for public discourse only by virtue of being either problematic or useful.

Keywords: desecularization, expediency, post-secularity, public religion, new visibility of religion, secularization, welfare

1   Introduction

Is God Back?[1] A recent popular book – *God is Back*[2] – answers in the affirmative and joins a host of others that argue that religion has not vanished from our supposedly secularized world. Long imagined to be dying, religion instead is alive, vibrant, and stronger than ever, these books claim. In fact, a new orthodoxy seems to be emerging: a whole "religion in public life" industry now triumphantly celebrates the death of the secularization thesis. The evacuation of religion from the public sphere – politics, welfare, education, health care, media – has not happened, these scholars claim, the way secularization theories predicted.

Everyday experience seems to confirm the celebrationist view: Even in Europe, long considered the stronghold of secularization, religion has become a topic of discussion in arenas ranging from parliaments to coffeehouses. People who were completely indifferent to religion are now engaging in heated debates about its role in modern society – something unimaginable barely fifteen years ago. Much of this talk is informed by the media where religion stories are increasingly prominent. Not only has the presence of religion in the media quantitatively increased in the new millennium, but religion also seems to carry more weight as a news item – not least because of its frequent association with social problems.[3] In the

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[1] See Titus Hjelm (ed.), *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).

[2] John Micklethwait and Alan Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World* (London: Penguin, 2009).

[3] Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole and Teemu Taira, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013); Titus Hjelm, "Religion and Social Problems: Three Perspectives," in Titus Hjelm (ed.), *Religion and Social Problems* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1–11.

post-9/11 world, the most significant reason for religion's return to the public imagination has been the fact that it has been associated with political violence. Whether in political discourse, policing, the media, or everyday talk, "religious extremism" has become a simplistic shorthand for a wide variety of complex structural dynamics.

There is, then, widespread agreement on the increased *visibility* of religion. But what does this "new visibility of religion" mean? This is different from asking whether "secularization theory" is right or wrong.[4] After all, public presence and visibility is only one aspect of the cluster of dynamics generally subsumed under "secularization". Hence, it is reasonable to ask whether equating religion's increased visibility with increased vitality or influence on other institutions – as some of the celebrationist accounts seem to do – is justified.[5] As Bryan Turner points out, there is a danger of equating social prevalence with cultural dominance, "confusing frequency with social effects." Turner is referring to theoretical accounts of "civil religion", but his argument is transferable to the question of the public visibility of religion: "It cannot be assumed that beliefs and practices which are publicly available necessarily have significant effects in the upkeep of crucial social processes and social arrangements."[6]

Yet, to separate visibility and social effects completely would also be a mistake. As Nilüfer Göle convincingly argues with reference to the visibility of Islam in Europe, visibility itself can have wide-ranging effects for societies and the faithful alike:

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[4] Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl, "Introduction," in Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl (eds), *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics* (London: Continuum, 2008), 1–14.
[5] Cf. David Herbert, "Theorizing Religion and Media in Contemporary Societies: An Account of religious 'Publicization'," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14/6 (2011), 626–648, at 632.
[6] Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*. Second Edition (London: Sage, 1991), 59.

Veiling in the public schools and Muslim candidates in the parliament, mosques near the churches and the cathedrals, praying in the streets, all are examples that make 'indifference' impossible for Europeans who find themselves in a passionate debate over the presence of Islamic signs in public life. However, these confrontational controversies around Islam reveal the tumultuous transition and recognition from the status of an invisible migrant to that of a visible Muslim citizenship.[7]

This article asks what the new visibility of religion means, how religion is contested and renegotiated in the public arena – or rather, in different publics – and what the effects of these struggles are on society, state and religion itself. It does so by providing an analytical overview five distinct approaches to the new visibility of religion: desecularization, de-privatization and post-secularity; the effects of "welfare utopianism" on public religion; religion as a social problem; religion as expedient; and the mediatization or publicization of religion. The different approaches are discussed and evaluated in order to draw together possible theoretical lessons about the new visibility of religion. The list is not exhaustive – mine is not an attempt to summarise the current "master narratives" about the future of religion.[8] In conclusion, I argue that what we are witnessing is a "secular return" of religion, where religion is relevant for public discourse only by virtue of being either problematic or useful.

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[7] Nilüfer Göle, "The public visibility of Islam and European politics of resentment: The minarets-mosques debate," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37/4 (2011), 383–392, at 388.
[8] James V. Spickard, "What is Happening to Religion? Six Sociological Narratives," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 19/1 (2006), 13–29.

2   Desecularization, Deprivatization and Post-Secularity

Peter L. Berger, the *doyen* of late 20th century sociology of religion, has the curious

distinction of being probably the singularly most influential proponent of the secularization

thesis and, later, a spokesman for *de*secularization and the rebuttal of his own earlier work.

Already in the 1970s Berger started questioning his earlier view on secularization outlined in

The Sacred Canopy, but the final break came in *The Desecularization of the World* in which

Berger admitted that had been wrong and that the world was as "furiously religious" as ever.[9]

The resilience and resurgence of religion is, so Berger argues, a global phenomenon and

people should look for secularization in the common rooms of elite universities rather in the

world at large.

The problem with "desecularization" is that it is more a selective description of what the

world is like, a "diagnosis of our times,"[10] than a theory of social and religious change. As

Casanova has argued, the permanence or resurgence of religion in public life in different

parts of the world does not by itself prove the secularization thesis wrong. It does call for the

refinement of theory, but without reference to the particular aspects of the thesis they are

trying to invalidate, individual case studies can help very little in understanding broader

patterns of social change.[11] Or, as Bruce puts it, the religious evolution in Iran does not really

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[9] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967); Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in Peter L. Berger (ed.) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1–18, at 2.

[10] Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1944).

[11] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 212.

refute what has happened in Essex.[12] A problem also arises out of the term itself. The term

"desecularization" and references to a "resurgence" of religion in the modern world imply

that secularization *has* in fact happened and what we are witnessing now is a return of

religion in public life. At the same time, however, many of those arguing for desecularization

emphasize the fact that the world (with the possible exception of Western Europe) has *never*

been secular. There is an obvious logical discrepancy here. Yet, as I will argue below,

desecularization can be a useful term when used with reference to the visibility of religion in

particular.

Although some commentators[13] continue to use "desecularization", its application has been

limited owing to the problems described above. However, the concept of "deprivatization",

associated first and foremost with José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World*,[14]

has been the crux of much if not most recent discussion about the role of religion in the

modern world. Casanova's work has contributed to theoretical clarification by insisting on

understanding secularization as three separate processes: (1) as differentiation, where

religious institutions relinquish some of their functions to other institutions, such as education

and social work; (2) as declining belief practice on the individual level; (3) as privatization,

where religion becomes a personal issue and evacuates from the public sphere. According to

Casanova, modernization does not automatically entail secularization on all three levels, but

rather only on the level of differentiation. The two other processes are context-dependent.[15]

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[12] Steve Bruce, "The Curious Case of the Unnecessary Recantation: Berger and Secularization," in Linda Woodhead with Paul Heelas and David Martin (eds), *Peter L. Berger and the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 87–100, at 89.

[13] Linda Woodhead, "Introduction," in Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (eds), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–33.

[14] Casanova, *Public Religions*.

[15] Casanova, *Public Religions*, 19–39; In later work Casanova has toned down even the connection between modernity and differentiation: José Casanova, "Rethinking secularization: a global comparative perspective.", *The Hedgehog Review* 8/1–2 (2006), 7–22.

While in the (West) European context deprivatization makes sense, it is less useful globally speaking, because religion never lost its role in public life. Although the re-emergence of religion in public life after years of Communist oppression in Easter Europe is sometimes used as an example of indigenous deprivatization,[16] Herbert argues that "deprivatization is inappropriate in post-communist societies because communism suppressed and denied the legitimacy of any private sphere, seeking to remove all obstacles between the state and the individual."[17] As I will discuss below, Herbert's own term "republicization" is potentially a more useful concept in analyzing the public visibility of religion.

Finally, we have the now-ubiquitous "post-secularity". The current faddishness of the "post-secular" and "post-secularity" owes much to the weight that the name of Jürgen Habermas has given it.[18] Habermas was not the first to use the term, but it was his use of the "post-secular" that sparked the current flood of discussion. Although, in many cases it seems that there is very little actual *discussion* but rather an uncritical acceptance of post-secularity as an accurate description of the state of things in the world. There are critical assessments as well,[19] but equally many studies that treat post-secularity as an empirical premise, no matter

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[16] Casanova, *Public Religions*, chapter 4; David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), chapters 7 and 8.

[17] Herbert, "Theorizing Religion and Media", 631.

[18] Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on a Post-Secular Society," *Sign and Sight* (2008). [http://print.signandsight.com/features/1714, accessed 16/09/14]; Michele Dillon, "Can Post-Secular Society Tolerate Religious Differences?" *Sociology of Religion*, 71/2 (2010), 39–56; Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 203.

[19] Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmayer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, "Introduction," in Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmayer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds), *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–30; Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, "The Post-Secular in Question," in Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds), *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 1–22; Marcus Moberg, Kenneth Granholm and Peter Nynäs, "Trajectories of Post-Secular Complexity: An Introduction," in Peter Nynäs, Mika Lassander and Terhi Utriainen (eds), *Post-Secular Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 1–25.

how inconclusive the evidence.[20] In these treatments Habermas' originally normative use of the concept – that religious arguments have a right to be heard in the public sphere, even if the state should remain secular[21] – is changed into a description of historical change, or rather, historical stability. The "will to religion" – "the discursive construction of a normal in which we are all religious", as Lori Beaman beautifully puts it – is, it seems, strong among scholars of religion.[22]

The problem of making the conceptual leap from a normative statement to empirical premise is not the only problem with the uses of "post-secularity". A comprehensive review of the uses of the term is offered by Beckford,[23] so I won't go into detailed critique here. Suffice it to say that I have little to add to Beckford's evaluation:

> The meanings attributed to the "postsecular" are not only varied and partly incompatible with each other... The concept of "postsecular" trades on simplistic notions of the secular. It has a shortsighted view of history. It refuses to examine the legal and political forces at work in regulating what counts as "religion" in public life. There is therefore a danger that talking about the postsecular will be like waving a magic wand over all the intricacies,

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[20] James A. Beckford, "SSSR Presidential Address: Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51/1 (2012), 1–19.
[21] Beckford, "SSSR Presidential Address", 10.
[22] Lori Beaman, "The Will to Religion: Obligatory Religious Citizenship," *Critical Research on Religion* ½ (2013), 141–157, at 146; cf. Gregor McLennan, "Towards Postsecular Sociology?" *Sociology* 41/5 (2007), 857–870.
[23] Beckford, "SSSR Presidential Address."

contradictions, and problems of what counts as religion to reduce them to a single, bland category.[24]

What I would like to add, however, is that in light of what is said about the problems of post-secularity and the transition to a "new era" that it implies, desecularization does not seem such a bad concept after all. As discussed above, it makes little sense to say that the world that was never *actually* secular is now being desecularized. But "desecularization" can be useful when applied to the public visibility of religion, and used in a limited sense. Firstly, desecularization implies a *process* that is dialectical and reversible, not a state of things. In terms of visibility, just think of Beirut and Tehran in the 1970s and then in the 2010s. Or the role of religion Poland before and after 1989. Certainly there has been a desecularization – a movement away from the secular – of public space and discourse. Yet, there is nothing inevitable about the current visibility of religion in the mentioned places, or elsewhere. If there is desecularization, there can be *re*secularization as well. Secondly, "desecularization" in the sense of visibility does not purport to say anything about beliefs or practices. Finally, the qualitative aspect of visibility needs to be considered: even when religious communities are reasserting themselves as public actors, their discourse can be secular – a point that Bruce makes in reference to the "culture wars" in the United States.[25]

3   Did 'Welfare Utopianism' Kill Public Religion?

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[24] Beckford, "SSSR Presidential Address," 16.
[25] Bruce, *Secularization*, 171.

One of the more conspicuous reasons for the new visibility of religion is the increased role religious groups play in European welfare provision. The usual narrative goes like this: the European welfare states that emerged after World War II took over most, if not all, of the social and welfare functions that the churches had provided. The nature and extent of the state's encroachment of the welfare field varied according to religious cleavages and class coalitions,[26] but in all countries the churches' role in poor relief and other functions was diminished in an attempt to provide universal healthcare, social services, education, and redistribution of wealth, so that poor relief would not be needed in the first place. According to the standard account, this system started to crumble under the neoliberal drive to privatization that started with the ascent of Britain's Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and was consolidated some thirty years later by the across-the-board acceptance of austerity measures ushered in by global actors such as the US Federal Reserve, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

Adam Dinham[27] has examined how in the British case government policies deliberately marginalised faith-based welfare providers in a push to create an overarching public welfare system. This also had the residual effect, Dinham[28] argues, of decreasing the overall "religious literacy" of Britons during the "statist" years, thus not only decreasing religion's role in people's everyday practice but, potentially, in their thought as well.

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[26] Philip Manow and Kees van Kersbergen,"'Religion and the Western Welfare State – The Theoretical Context," in Philip Manow and Kees van Kersbergen (eds), *Religion, Class Coalitions, and Welfare States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–38.

[27] Adam Dinham, *Faiths, Public Policy and Civil Society: Problems, Policies, Controversies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Adam Dinham and Robert Jackson, "Religion, Welfare and Education," in Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (eds), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 2010), 271 –294.

[28] Dinham and Jackson, "Religion, Welfare and Education," 272.

So far so good. However, where Dinham's account limits itself to the particular fields of welfare and religious literacy, Linda Woodhead's sweeping overview of post-war Britain takes Dinham's idea and makes the welfare state the main factor evacuating religion from public life in Britain. In this account "welfare utopianism" – an "object of faith in its own right" – was the source of state control, which suppressed religion until "new opportunities of market and media" freed religion from the chains of the state, despite some backlashes of "re-regulatory" attempts of "illiberal secularism."[29] Hence, the return of religion is *actually* about the "crisis of confidence in secularism itself, bound up with challenges to the prestige of science and a loss of faith in utopian post-war secular projects."[30] The visibility brought about by immigration, religious diversification, and the perception of religion as a problem are secularist residues, which have just made it "easier to focus anxiety and blame on religion, veiled women and Islamic terrorism".[31] The true source of religion's return (at least in the British context), it seems, is the current unwillingness of the state to regulate religion.

There is not a little bit of what could be called "gemeinschaftism" in the "welfare utopianism killed public religion" account. "Gemeinschaftism" refers, of course, to Ferdinand Tönnies' way of describing the transition from pre-modern communities (*Gemeinschaft*) to modern societies (*Gesellschaft*) as a process of loss (Callinicos, 2007: 128).[32] From this point of view, the "rolling back" of the welfare state and the subsequent new visibility of religion is a return

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[29] Woodhead, "Introduction," 1; Linda Woodhead, "Liberal Religion and Illiberal Secularism," in Gavin D'Costa, Malcolm Evans, Tariq Modood and Julian Rivers (eds), *Religion in a Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 93–116.

[30] The basis of these assertions is unclear: NHS, the secular utopian project, enjoys historically high levels of satisfaction among the British public (e.g. http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/bsa-survey-2012/satisfaction-nhs-overall accessed 25/09/14). Similarly, it is very likely safe to say that the vast majority of Britons still prefer to have their cancer treated by a GP rather than a faith healer.

[31] Woodhead, "Introduction," 11.

[32] Alex Callinicos, *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

to a natural, normal equilibrium (cf. "will to religion" above). This rereading of British

history is fascinating, but problematic. Firstly, despite an explicit aim to consider religion not

in isolation, but in relation to economics, politics, culture, etc., the account mostly ignores the

social changes during the period of "welfare utopianism". The Britain of the 1950s and the

Britain of today are different countries. Immigration, religious diversification, and the

perception religion as a problem *have* made religion a different topic from what it used to be

before the emergence of European welfare states, as Göle, among others, convincingly

argues.[33] Secondly, the case was much less straightforwardly about the state waging a

"culture war" on religion than the account suggests. In Britain, as in the Nordic countries,

mainstream churches were often supportive of expanding the welfare functions of the state –

or, conversely, against neoliberal policies which were plighting the urban working class, as

the controversial *Faith in the City* –report from 1985 attests (Davie, 1994: 151–153; e.g.

Anderson, 2009).[34] The division of labour in this issue was much more contested in Catholic

majority countries.[35] Finally, the idea that the current re-emergence of religion is somehow a

natural – after the abnormality of state-forced absence – or an accidental process, as

Woodhead implies and Dinham and Jackson[36] explicitly claim, is highly contestable. As

Beckford,[37] for example, has shown, governments have very actively solicited "faiths" to take

on welfare functions, especially during the last twenty years. In fact, in the same text where

Dinham and Jackson argue that the welfare period was "followed by an *accidental* re-

emergence of religious social action in welfare" (emphasis in original), they also claim that

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[33] Göle, "The public visibility of Islam."

[34] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Karen M. Anderson, "The Church as Nation? The Role of Religion in the Development of the Swedish Welfare State," in Philip Manow and Kees van Kersbergen (eds), *Religion, Class Coalitions, and Welfare States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 210–325.

[35] Manow and Kersbergen,"'Religion and the Western Welfare State."

[36] Dinham and Jackson, "Religion, Welfare and Education," 272.

[37] James A. Beckford, "Religious Diversity and Social Problems: The Case of Britain," in Titus Hjelm (ed.), *Religion and Social Problems* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 53–66.

the shift to market-led welfare provision "marked a *conscious* move towards provision of all sorts of services, not by government, but by voluntary sector agencies" (my emphasis).[38]

The argument that "welfare utopianism" killed public religion bestows too much power on the state and sidesteps crucial social changes to be the full story of the new visibility of religion. Can we really claim that the public attention paid to diversity and the potentially negative aspects of religion are residues of secularist thinking? The war on terror, for example, was not exactly initiated by hard-line secularists. Religious people seem to be as capable of differentiating between "good" and "bad'" religion as "illiberal secularists." Associating neoliberalism with the new visibility of religion is correct, as I will argue below, but not in the sense of restoring some kind of market equilibrium in religion's public presence after a period of interfering government. The perception of religion as a social problem is as much an outcome of rapid global change as it is of secularist ideology, the neoliberal appropriation of religion as much an outcome of active policy as 'welfare utopianism' was.[39]

Religion as a Social Problem

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[38] Dinham and Jackson, "Religion, Welfare and Education," 276.

[39] As an aside, despite disagreeing with the argument, I welcome the openly political position that Woodhead takes in her chapter. Sociology of religion – with the exception of feminist work – has traditionally shied away from openly political commitments, in my opinion to the detriment of the sub-discipline. However, even if I laud the commitment, I do not share the politics and find it difficult to avoid a comparison with famous left-wing historian Eric Hobsbawm's assessment of a 19th century conservative: "The British jurist, A.V. Dicey (1835–1922) saw the steamroller of collectivism, which had been in motion since 1870, flattening the landscape of individual liberty into the centralized and levelling tyranny of school meals, health insurance and old age pensions." Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London: Abacus, 1987), 103.

The idea of the welfare state was, in principle, to combat the social problems endemic to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, especially during post-war reconstruction. In practice the motivations for setting up public welfare have been contingent on various political and social factors, but combating social problems has always been the explicit core of welfare provision. In the European context, care of the poor and the sick was of course for a long time mainly the function of local parishes and certain religious orders. Later, organizations such as the Salvation Army and the worker priest movement were established on religious principles to combat social problems. It was only in the twentieth century that the state assumed many of the functions that religious communities had traditionally had. In that sense, the role of religion as a solution to social problems is well established.

During the latter half of the twentieth century – and certainly after 9/11 in the new millennium – religion was, however, increasingly perceived not only as a solution, but also a source of social problems.[40] Interreligious strife has, of course, existed as long as there have been competing communities of belief and practice (making *some* religions problematic in particular contexts), and secularist states – revolutionary France, USSR and China – have at times struck at "reactionary" religion (making *all* religions problematic in their national contexts). The political attention given to religion has, however, reached new heights in Europe within the last twenty or so years. Fear of "parallel societies," religiously inspired terrorism, human rights violations, and loss of national identity in the face of mass immigration have all contributed to an awareness of religion as a potential source of social

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[40] Titus Hjelm, "Religion and Social Problems: Three Perspectives," in Titus Hjelm (ed.), *Religion and Social Problems* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1–11; James A. Beckford, "The Sociology of Religion and Social Problems." *Sociological Analysis*, 51/1 (1990), 1–14.

problems.[41] When I say "fear of," I am not implying that the negative aspects of religion are imagined. Bad things that are religiously motivated, or at least religiously legitimated, actually happen. But what comprises "bad things" is relative, socially constructed.[42] It is easy to agree that bombs or female genital mutilation should be condemned, but what about kosher butchering? Wearing a headscarf? Despite the convergence of governance in Europe, questions regarding religion remain entrenched in national and regional traditions. Indeed, as McCrea argues, the *cuius regio eius religio* theme has been reaffirmed in a modern variation in key EU agreements such as the Amsterdam Treaty and the Reform (Lisbon) Treaty.[43]

The increased visibility of religion as a social problem – whether concerning particular religions and religious practices, or the social role of religion in general, as in discussions about French *laïcité* – is important in at least two senses: First, as Steve Bruce puts it, "since Jürgen Habermas popularized talk of a 'post-secular Europe', there has been much confusion between religion becoming more troublesome and people becoming more religious."[44] On the one hand, the roots of religious violence, for example, are complex and not reducible to this or that religious belief. The more religious are not necessarily the more troublesome, as the case of British "Islam for Dummies" jihadists demonstrates.[45] On the other hand, the fear of radical Islam in Europe is unlikely to trigger a Christian revival because most of the anti-

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[41] Yasemin El-Menouar and Melanie Becker, "Islam and Integration in German Media Discourse," in Titus Hjelm (ed.), *Religion and Social Problems* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 229–244; John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Peter Cumper and Tom Lewis (eds), *Religion, Rights and Secular Society: European Perspectives* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012).

[42] Titus Hjelm, *Social Constructionisms: Approaches to the Study of the Human World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014b), 37–56.

[43] Ronan McCrea, *Religion and the Public Order of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[44] Bruce, *Secularization*, 203.

[45] Mehdi Hasan, "What the jihadists who bought 'Islam for Dummies' on Amazon tell us about radicalisation," *New Statesman*, 21 August 2014. [http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2014/08/what-jihadists-who-bought-islam-dummies-amazon-tell-us-about-radicalisation, accessed 17/09/14]

immigration discourse is secular and because "most Christians are not xenophobes".[46] Hence, the apparently increased "troublesomeness" of religion, fuelled by sensationalistic media visibility, is not a measure of increased religiosity.

Second, even if we cannot say much about the return of religion in terms of belief or practice, the construction of religion, particular religions, or religious practices as problematic gives us important clues about the struggles to define regional, national, local, and individual identity: "Every version of an 'other,' wherever found, is also the construction of a 'self'".[47] Hence, for example, every European version of Islam, wherever found, is also a construction of Europe.[48] Defining social problems and their solutions then becomes a question of power: who gets to define "bad" and "good" religion? This is an especially pertinent question in a time where religion is increasingly co-opted by governments for welfare and diversity management purposes.

Religion as Expedient

One aspect of the new visibility of religion which has mostly escaped the attention of European sociologists of religion is the critical assessment of "the ways in which governments and other public authorities use religion as a device or resource in the policies

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[46] Bruce, *Secularization*, 219.

[47] James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 23..

[48] Titus Hjelm, "Introduction: Islam and Muslims in European News Media," *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 5/2 (2012), 137–139.

for combating social problems".[49] "Religion as expedient" refers, then, to "policies and practices that acknowledge the potential of drawing on religious resources to solve problems".[50] In an age of "big society" and "rolling back" the state, "faith" has become a political resource: "'Faith' in policy parlance, becomes something which may (or may not) be useful and, moreover, 'usable' by the state and civil society".[51] In the United States the establishment of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001 (later renamed the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships) sparked a debate about the role of religion in the provision of welfare and social problems prevention (Farnsley, 2007; Davis, 2011).[52] As Europe increasingly embraces austerity and other neoliberal policies, the role of religious communities in welfare provision and social integration has also become increasingly pertinent. The establishment of a Faith Communities Unit in the UK Home Office in 2003 (later relocated in the Department for Communities and Local Government) is an example of a more formalised cooperation, but there is ample evidence of religious NGOs playing an increasing role in state or EU funded welfare provision in Europe.[53]

When calling for a *critical* approach to religion as expedient, I am trying to draw attention to the so far little examined unexpected consequences of these increased state-religion

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[49] Beckford, "Religious Diversity and Social Problems," 59.

[50] Beckford, "Religious Diversity and Social Problems," 59.

[51] Dinham and Jackson, "Religion, Welfare and Education," 272.

[52] Derek H. Davis, "George W. Bush and Church-State Partnerships to Administer Social Service Programs: Cautions and Concerns," in Titus Hjelm (ed.), *Religion and Social Problems* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 186–197; Arthur E. Farnsley, "Faith-based Initiatives," in James A. Beckford and N. Jay Demerath (eds), *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (London: Sage, 2007), 345–356.

[53] Sanna Lehtinen, "Fighting against Unemployment: Finnish Parishes as Agents in European Social Fund Projects," in Titus Hjelm (ed.), *Religion and Social Problems* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 67–81.

partnerships.[54] When politicians and state agencies interpellate or "hail"[55] religious

communities to define themselves as partners in welfare provision and integration, they also –

sometimes explicitly, sometimes inadvertently – force these communities to define the limits

of legitimate religion and religiosity. The state will obviously only cooperate with

communities that do not infringe the rights of other citizens and which support integration

into the national community and values – however these might be constructed. Hence, at the

more visible end of legitimation demands, we have the case of the "Muslim vigilantes" in

East London. This was a group of young men who posted videos on YouTube where they

were shown driving people drinking alcohol or people who they considered "inappropriately

dressed" away from a "Muslim area". The response of the East London Mosque – one of the

recognised representatives of the British Muslim Community – was unequivocal: the patrols

were condemned and said to have done "a huge amount of damage to the Muslim

community".[56] At the less visible end, there have been cases where state demand for gender

equality and women's empowerment programmes in development work, for example, have

led to tensions within conservative faith-based service providers.[57] In both cases the key issue

is that the communities have had to define "what we are" or "what we are not" in the face of

external interpellation.

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[54] Titus Hjelm, "Paradoxes of Religious Legitimacy and Authenticity in an Age of Expediency". A paper presented at the annual conference of the British Sociological Association, 24 April 2014; Titus Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power: Outline of a Critical Agenda for the Sociology of Religion," *Critical Sociology*, 40/6 (2014a), 855–871.

[55] James A. Beckford, "SSSR Presidential Address: Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51/1 (2012), 1–19, at 16.

[56] CNN, "Muslim Vigilantes Bring Sharia Law to London," 1 February 2013. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2IiSHQntis (accessed 29/09/14)

[57] Marit Tolo Østebø, Haldis Haukanes and Astrid Blystad, "Strong State Policies on Gender and Aid: Threats and Opportunities for Norwegian Faith-Based Organisations," *Forum for Development Studies*, 40/2 (2013), 193–216.

So far I have been following in Beckford's footsteps on the issue of religion as expedient. I would like to, however, expand the discussion to the unexpected consequences of the process of interpellation described above. My argument is that legitimation is rarely, if ever, a smooth process. Since definitions – in this case, the definition of legitimate religion, religiosity, or religious practice – are, by definition, contested, legitimation is always a struggle. In my conceptual scheme, *authenticity* is the flipside of legitimacy, and legitimation always leads to authenticity struggles within the communities. These can range from civilised debate to division. In other words, what I call the "The Paradoxes of Expediency Thesis" goes like this: *Public authorities' increased tendency to treat religion as expedient interpellates religious communities to formulate legitimation strategies. These lead, by definition, to authenticity struggles which, in turn, can lead to schism, polarisation and radicalism.* When politicians and scholars of religion celebrate the new visibility of expedient religion, they would be wise to consider the dynamics of legitimacy and authenticity which may paradoxically encourage the very phenomena that the policies are designed to combat.

Religious "Publicization" and Mediatization

No account of the visibility of religion in the modern world can avoid the role of the media, especially the developments in electronic media. Only 25 years ago, when selected passages from Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* were being distributed to offended Muslims, the campaign relied on photocopying and postage. In 2005, the images of the Muhammad cartoons controversy spread like wildfire online.[58] On the one hand, the deregulation of

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[58] David Herbert, "Theorizing Religion and Media," 633.

media markets has enabled a proliferation of religious symbols and discourse in popular culture, for example.[59] On the other hand, the expansion of media technologies beyond "mediated quasi-interaction"[60] has changed the way in which people interact with other people through social media, including religious authorities and resources. This religious "publicization," as Herbert[61] defines it, refers "primarily to the public presence of religious symbols and discourses." This, he adds, "does not necessarily imply that these become more influential, but rather more visible, present and hence available for mobilization, contestation and criticism in the public sphere." Hence, for example, the proliferation of anti-Islamic online forums is not a sign of the increased vitality of Islam. Nor is it, less obviously, a sign of the increased vitality of Christianity, for that matter.

Another concept that has sought to capture the role of the media in recent religious change is "mediatization" (e.g. Hjarvard, 2012).[62] Mediatization conveys the idea that while religion might be more visible through its media presence, it is in fact "tamed" by the media to conform to particular logics of genre and media convention. Hence, for example, religion makes the news mostly when connected to controversy, scandal, or threat. In early formulations of the concept, Hjarvard emphasised how mediatization creates "banal" religion, transforming it from a source of identity formation to a source of entertainment. While there is little doubt that the media presence of religion is dominated by negative coverage, the latter claim has been contested as blanket theory of media effects. However, for the purposes of

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[59] e.g. Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[60] e.g. books, newspapers, radio, television; John B. Thompson, *Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

[61] David Herbert, "Theorizing Religion and Media," 627.

[62] e.g. Stig Hjarvard, "Three Forms of Mediatized Religion: Changing the Public Face of Religion," in Stig Hjarvard and Mia Lövheim (eds), *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives* (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2012), 21–44.

this chapter, the aspect that mediatization theory does capture and confirm is that increased visibility does not equal increased vitality or influence.

Conclusion: Religion as Problem, Religion as Utility

What to make of these theorizations of the new visibility of religion, then? On the one hand, and at the risk of repetition, it is clear that visibility, vitality and social influence are different things. The sometimes barely contained enthusiasm about the new visibility of religion has done a disservice to the analytical study of religion. The celebrationist account seems to be doomed to repeat the sins of the secularization thesis, which was, according to one famous opponent, "a taken-for-granted *ideology* rather than a systematic set of interrelated propositions."[63] Yet, as argued above, visibility can have a potential impact on vitality and social influence, although not necessarily in ways imagined by religious communities themselves. Visibility informs the ways in which we talk about religion – not to mention that in many cases it is the reason why religion is back on the everyday, political and media agendas in the first place.

On the other hand, it is apparent that what counts in the public visibility of religion is practice, not belief. Beliefs are not very interesting *per se* (beyond the occasional tabloid story about the "weird" beliefs of new religious movements). The practices putatively arising from particular beliefs are. Public controversy about religion tends to be almost exclusively

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[63] Jeffrey Hadden, "Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory," *Social Forces*, 65/3 (1987), 587–611.

about things such as headscarves, opposition to teaching evolution in schools, and the putative religious motivations of violence. Heresy is not an argument against particular religions in contemporary Europe; immoral – however that is defined – or possibly illegal actions by religious individuals or groups is. Similarly, European states are, at least in principle, neutral regarding religious beliefs. Religion becomes interesting when it is seen to contribute positively (as in welfare provision) or negatively (as in "parallel societies," or violence) to the broader society.

Is God back, as Micklethwait and Wooldridge claim? The blunt answer is: no. To put it differently: Religion, not God, is back. There is an internal secularization of discourse, if you will, at work in the new visibility of religion. Religion, as any cultural phenomenon, is the object of different types of *valorisations* – ascriptions of value – and, despite all the talk about "faith," it is the social contribution of religions rather than faith that is being valorised. In the case of welfare, for example, "religious groups are recognized for the instrumental role they play in delivery of services and cohesion. It is their public activity which is in focus, not the interior life of faith itself, nor the religious reasons or goals which motivate it."[64] This is the "secular return of religion": Religion is visible because it can be good or bad, but God has little to do with it.

Acknowledgements

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