Religion beyond its Private Role in Modern Society

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SOME THOUGHTS ON PRIVATISATION AND DE-INSTITUTIONALISATION: RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Meerten B. ter Borg

Introduction

Some scholars of religion and culture appear to have proclaimed the secularisation thesis to be dead. Appearances are deceitful, however. The secularisation thesis is alive and kicking. Admittedly, the secularisation thesis, especially in its hardcore variant, is under ever increasing pressure. Hardly anybody now believes in the optimistically inclined theory of Auguste Comte and his successors, which describes religion as a preliminary stage on the path to true knowledge. There was a time when academics believed several variants of this theory to be evidently true. This is now no longer the case. Its milder variants, according to which modernity and religion are, in principle, incompatible, has been falsified by the situation in the United States among others. All that remains for the supporters of the theory is the mildest form of the secularisation thesis, which claims the public relevance of religion is subject to erosion.

As far back as the 1960s, the privatisation thesis arose as an alternative to the secularisation thesis. The disappearance of religion was supposed to be illusory: religion has merely withdrawn to the private sphere. Linked to it is the idea that people nowadays put together their own religions.

All things considered, this is not an alternative to the secularisation thesis, but rather a specification of the decline of the influence of religion, and as such, it is in total accordance with the soft variant of the secularisation thesis. It could be said that the privatisation thesis is the contemporary incarnation of the secularisation thesis. Religion is disappearing from society, and continues to exist as a private matter. Seen from this perspective, the shift from an ecclesiastical religion to individual spirituality, expected by some, is not a denial of secularisation thesis, but a confirmation of it.

The privatisation thesis has a number of variants. One of them is the above mentioned bricolage theory. Another is the 'belonging without believing'-theory (Davie, 1994) and finally there is the thesis of self-spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead, 2007).

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From a sociological perspective, privatisation may appear amazing. After all, religion has, to a large extent, been a collective force. It always had the function of sacralising social cohesions and social identity. Did this get totally lost in the process of privatisation? Or does the sociology of religion lack the means to make this side of religion visible?

The privatisation thesis is too narrow and too one-sided to describe the development of religion in Western Europe in its totality. Its supporters' perception of the processes to which religion is subject are too one-sided. Privatisation is primarily a consequence of the process of differentiation. But the effects social differentiation has on society as a whole on the one hand and religion on the other differs. The process of de-institutionalisation for example, is another effect (see, for instance, Giddens, 1990; and Bauman, 2000).

In this contribution, I will briefly lay out the influence of a number of these effects, in which the emphasis will be on de-institutionalisation. It will turn out that the public functions of religion will once more enter the picture.

There will be three stages to this brief analysis. I will define religion, as any scholar of religion in the modern age seems to be destined to do. Secondly, I will sketch a number of sub-processes to which religion is subject. And finally, I will lay out the effects of these processes on three distinct levels: the level of the believing individual, the level of the collective, and the level of background notions.

Religion as Function

In much of the literature of the sociology of religion, it is taken for granted that religion is an institution. The theory of secularisation does, in actual fact, concern the decline of the institutions that carry the religion (for instance membership of the church, church attendance, and faith). Other institutions take over the functions of religion. In such instances, we talk about functional equivalents. Because religion is conceived of as an institution, the religious character of its functions falls away. To take an example from Durkheim. Durkheim studies the way in which religion lends a society social cohesion. The division of labour causes this function to be taken over by economic interdependence, and thereby loses its religious character by definition. The fact that this process is never fully realised does nothing to invalidate this principle.

When religion is tied exclusively to institutions, it is by definition impossible for religion to de-institutionalise. Religion might disappear, or change,

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or even miraculously re-appear, but it cannot de-institutionalise. At the moment, many believe the miracle of re-appearance has taken place, after having believed for decades that religion was disappearing (secularisation thesis).

If we turn the issue around, everything looks very different. The essence of religion is not the institution that carries it, but its function. The function of religion might, for instance, be the reconciliation with reality. People know they must die, and in all likelihood suffer as well. They know they will fail in many ways. They know they live in a world order that far transcends their powers. To teach people to be able to live with this is a function that can be exercised in many different ways. Some of those ways could be called religious; others cannot. In this essay we will conceive this function as religious as soon as it takes on an air of numinosity.

The function of consolation with finiteness can be given a place in any kind of institution. In fact, anything can take on this function for people. It is not necessarily tied to a carefully delimited institution. And anything can assume the numinous quality that makes it religious. It could be science, or art, or sports. What we are talking about here is non-institutional religion, that is to say, religion that has not taken on the form of institutions. And we are also talking about implicit religion, that is to say, religion of which people are not conscious as such.

The far-reaching institutionalisation of religion, joined to a hierarchic organisation and a permanent striving for monopolisation of religion is typical of Christianity. It is not uniquely Christian, but Christianity did take it further, to the extent that it has become relatively easy to distinguish between religion and other cultural goods.

In non-Christian societies, the numinous has spread out across many institutions and sense-making systems. No wonder that attempting to analyse religion in those parts of the world in terms that are oriented towards the West, causes problems.

What we now also increasingly see in Western society, is that religious feelings and ideas are more and more located outside of the recognised religious institutions. If the Church and faith are taken as standards for what religion is, it could be said that religion is growing weaker. On the other hand, if religion is perceived as a quality of a function (that is to say, a hint of the numinous) it can be said that religion is de-institutionalising.

A few critical notes can be made:

Firstly: de-institutionalisation is not a substitute for secularisation. The processes of secularisation and de-institutionalisation do not exclude each other. There is undoubtedly secularisation in the sense of a process of

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increasing orientation on the world here and now. People are less oriented towards a world that transcends this world. Perhaps it has been replaced by a belief in progress. The magnificently increased welfare and the success of science also cause there to be less need for support or aid from higher powers, or for the dream of a life after this life. In a society highly determined by science, finiteness is a less pressing concern. Science and welfare have partially decreased the need for the function of religion, and partially taken over this function.

Secondly: the church has never managed to monopolise the numinous in its entirety. A vague, non-institutional religiosity has always continued to exist. People have always searched for answers regarding sense-making beyond the confines of the traditional answers. At the time when the Church was at the peak of its power, non-institutional religion, insofar as it could be traced, was dismissed as superstition or heresy. It was persecuted, and exterminated if possible. These attempts were never completely successful. People have continued to take recourse to all kinds of magical practices. Now that the Church has become less powerful, as a consequence of secularisation and the emergence of science, this has become even more difficult.

Thirdly: it is unlikely that de-institutionalisation will ever be fully realised. There will always be religion, and there will always be institutional religion. During a process of de-institutionalisation, religious institutions will always continue to inspire many people. There is a need for points of reference.

Fourthly: beyond processes of de-institutionalisation, there are also active processes of re-institutionalisation. This is to indicate that the development of religion is not a one-way process, as the secularisation thesis, being a child of the faith in progress, postulates.

Fifth: de-institutionalised religion will always adapt to cultural trends. If a society is individualising, for instance, there will always be a tendency to regard religiosity as a private matter. But at the same time, other cultural goods will also assume a religious function for some people. One could think of the sacralising of pop stars and other iconic figures.

This is the place for an initial conclusion. Anybody who predicts a spiritual revolution, and perceives individual spirituality as the primary form religion will take on in the 21st century (Heelas and Woodhead, 2007; Aupers and Houtman, 2006) are actually overly focussed on a single aspect of the process of de-institutionalisation in which religion in our society is currently caught up.

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Dimensions of Religion and the Process of Modernisation

Modern, substantial definitions of religion are almost always massively oriented towards traditional religion, that is to say, towards faith and membership. That religion has many other dimensions as well is often only partially taken into account. I will describe a number of these dimensions, as well as the impact of those dimensions of the process of modernisation.

Firstly, there is the degree of *secularism*. This is the extent to which the function of religion and the numinous are focused on this world. The numinous used to be more inner worldly in classical antiquity, for instance: it was more focused on this world, and more present in this world, than the Judaeo-Christian tradition with its transcendental god. In the process of modernisation, we also see a trend towards a greater degree of secularism within institutional religion. That is the case, for instance, with many of the currents within the New Age movement, in which people look for the divine within themselves.

Secondly, it is also possible that religious contents become a matter of *routine*. They loose their numinous or charismatic character. This process is extraordinarily important. For instance, the term 'equality' took on a different meaning: from 'equality in front of God' to 'equality in front of the law'. Occasionally, its numinous aspect is illuminated again, detached from its origins. However, the development of such a term can still be traced back to the tradition. It is still religious in the sense that it has been touched by the numinous.

In the third place, and connected with the previous point, there are the processes of *rationalisation* and *professionalisation*. There is an increasing demand for rational arguments, and religion is increasingly subjected to rational criticism. The critics are ever better educated.

In the fourth place, there is the degree of *implicitness*. Here, we are talking about institutions that do not have any relationship to religious institutions, but suddenly take on a religious significance for some people. Examples are football, and the worship of pop stars. Institutional religion is, to a high degree, explicit. Extensive references are made to God. In implicit religion, no God is mentioned, people might not even be aware of the religious dimension, and yet, the numinous lights up. People have the feeling they are lifted above themselves by a force they cannot comprehend.

In the fifth place, there is such a thing as the *relevance* of religiosity. A religion can be more or less relevant to an individual, but not to the community. Example: religion can be extremely important to a dying patient in

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a hospital, while being almost irrelevant to society at large. The relevance of religion is not always the same. If, when confronted with a serious disease, people can derive hope from a good therapy, the relevance of prayer diminishes. It is no longer the only recourse. Another example: the immense decrease in child mortality in modern society makes praying for the survival of the children less relevant.

As a sixth variable, I would mention *duration*. The days when people are religious all their lives seem to be over. Being religious is a capability, which people can switch on, or off, set high or low, for long periods of time, or just for a few moments. This also includes what I have elsewhere called optional religiosity, or standby religiosity (ter Borg, 2004). People take the possibility that they might one day need religion into account.

These last two variables have a special place within this essay. My aim is to supplement the privatisation thesis with a de-institutionalisation thesis, in which privatisation is merely one aspect, which can also be aided by de-institutionalisation.

The seventh variable is *privatisation.* Religion can have a strongly private character, such as the individual religions of the modern era, or it can take on an outspokenly public character, such as in the Shiite theocracy that rules Iran. The private or public character is also a matter of degree. Privatisation also includes the individualisation of religion and worldview.

The eighth variable, central in this essay, is the degree of *institutionalisation*. Religion can be defined very strictly, the numinous being limited to certain officials or certain rituals. This is what characterises Christianity. But, as has been said, the numinous may de-institutionalised. It may be present in all and everything.

This list of variables is not by any means complete, or systematic, and undoubtedly contains overlaps. Some variables are likely to be more important than others. But it suffices, if the point is to make it more likely that, when describing the development of religion in society, privatisation is not the only significant development.

Levels

The question that should be asked in speculating about the future of religion is not whether one institution (religion) will be replaced by another institution (for instance, science). The important thing is to conceive of ways in which the process of modernisation impacts different variables (that also affect each other), and what emerges from that interaction with regards to religion in the modern age.

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As has been said, we investigate the changes of the function 'religion' on three levels, which have been derived from Taylor (2007). The aim, as has been mentioned, is to make it plausible that privatisation will not be the inescapable destiny of religion.

The Individual Level

We will start with the development of the religious function on the individual level. It changes as a consequence of the process of modernisation. In the first instance it becomes less relevant, because many personal inconveniences and problems that made religion needed are disappearing. Nowadays, we live with what Inglehart (1990) has called a post-material mentality. In other words, in a period in which material problems, such as illness, poverty and material want have an ever diminishing impact upon the worldview. The problems that remain, and that have become ever more dominant in the course of the process of modernisation, are problems of sense-making. These are problems of sense, which, as an effect of the process of individualisation, are increasingly perceived as individual problems. Consequently, the solutions, that are offered, are also individual. People are from now on free to choose what they want, according to their own taste.

Additionally, religion becomes *optional*. The relevance of religion seems to disappear, only to recur very occasionally. It lacks durability. It becomes a matter of moments. Individual religious needs emerge sharply when existential crises are involved. A heart surgeon once told me: "If you want to see the pious, you should come to my department, a day prior to surgery." Beyond such sudden needs, religious questions and functions are highly implicit.

People more and more try to find answers to these needs outside of religion. They therefore tend to redefine their needs in a non-religious format, so that non-religious answers become available. They take their questions about the meaning of life to their psychotherapist, their social worker, or their doctor. They attempt to cure existential disquiet by means of consumption. Who am I am? I'm not a child of God: I'm a Volvo driver. What do I live for? To go on exciting holidays!

As we see: the religious question has been individualised. It is defined as a private matter. The filling of religious needs has been partially individualised. Some people (particularly those who Weber characterised as 'religious virtuosos') make up their own religion, the aforementioned bricolage. The elements of this bricolage can be their own invention, but they can also be derived from what from something public: the market for

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religion. On the religious market, they don't choose to buy wholesale religions, but primarily religious building blocks that connect directly to their needs, and can sometimes serve as the basic material for bricolages. The choices they make are not by definition religious; in some cases, they satisfy our definition of religion better than in other instances. The individual is not so much concerned about the religious character of his decisions. The adequacy of his choices for the fulfilment of his needs is what matters. Are the religious needs being met? The process of individualisation also means that individual choices can be made at all.

The Collective Level

The first question that occurs in the development of religion on a collective level is: does the sacralisation of the self satisfy all people's religious needs? On a collective level, the important thing is that people are inspired to submit to a specific social order. Let us limit the investigation to this function. Durkheim has given us the notion that modernisation has made religious questions more or less superfluous on a collective level. Because a far-reaching division of labour meant that people were functionally dependent on each other, belonging was no longer a problem. The only thing that was still needed was acceptance of each other's individuality. Durkheim foresaw a kind of sacralisation of the individual, which would also help the collective to gain an identity.

In the meantime, it has turned out that people are not satisfied by being nothing more than individuals, in a society in which there are only separate individuals. Durkheim discovered this soon enough. So how are these needs met? Everywhere, we see people who try to be committed to something and belong somewhere with a numinous zeal. People have an unshakeable thirst for conformity. It is part of their nature. They are herd animals, and their individualism does not normally extend beyond making choices from the assortment of options available to everybody. And that is how, paradoxically, individualism and individualistic religiosity are an expression of a communal way of life. As in the old days, modern people occasionally have collective experiences with the numinous. These are facilitated by the fact that this group of individuals derives inspiration for the religious function from the same sources.

These expressions of religiosity on a collective level are, in addition, strongly marked by the developments of religion in modernity which have just been drawn. They have a number of characteristics.

Often, the degree of institutionalisation is low, and its duration limited. Collective flash religiosity. Hypes with a religious character illustrate this.

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An example is the outburst of devotion surrounding the funeral of Lady Diana. In the Netherlands, calamities are often followed by silent marches and church services (a short-term reinstitutionalisation). The urgency and social relevance of these occurrences are obvious. Emotions are canalised, and the unity of large portions of society is reaffirmed. Their collective identity is restored for the time being. All this is reinforced by a brief experience of the numinous.

This may happen on a regular basis. Football is an example that is often mentioned. Memorials of destructive modern wars can also be perceived as the celebration of numinously charged collective experiences with a more highly official character. Examples are Poppy Day in England, and the fourth of May in the Netherlands. The same is true for memorials of other key moments in the history of a nation: Independence Day in the United States, the fourteenth of July in France, and Queen's Day in the Netherlands. Here, we see the expression of a kind of more or less secular civil religion. The social relevance of memorials and celebrations of this kind cannot be quantified, but it is my belief that it should not be underestimated.

If threats to society are perceived to be very serious, the societal relevance, duration, and urgency of this kind of religiosity increase accordingly. Separate individuals allow themselves to be tied down into a re-institutionalised order that depends on numinous experiences. Examples are political religions such as Nazism.

The so-called 'neo-tribes' are another thing entirely. The term derives from the sociologist Michel Maffesoli (1988). It involves people who use their lifestyle to show where they belong. We find them everywhere. From music lovers of all sorts and sizes to football fans. From people who only wear Prada or Luis Vuitton to youngsters covered in piercings. Such neo-tribes, and the accompanying values often try to escape the sense of randomness by all kinds of sacralisation. These are a collective extension of the sacralisation of the self. The values of these neo-tribes are beyond touch, sacred, wrapt in an aura of religiosity. Anybody who relativizes these values by casting any kind of doubt on them, is automatically reduced to the status of outsider. This is where the limitations of the term 'tribe' come to light. Real, old-fashioned tribes had no alternatives. A modern individual can hop from one neo-tribe to the next, or even combine the values of different tribes, so as to belong everywhere a little bit.

Some neo-tribes are highly regulated. Their lifestyle is often highly extroverted. Sometimes they are worldwide phenomena. The Hells Angels or the Elvis fan club are examples.

They are often strongly commercialised, which is something many regret. But it is also possible to perceive the contemporary neotribes and

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hypes, and their limited reach, as a gift of commerce. The chance that the will to belong grows into a massive, durable popular movement, as we have seen it in an earlier stage of the process of modernisation (think of nationalism and communism) has decreased. Admittedly, the improvised character of herd formation leads to societal instability. But the demonisation of out groups and the deification of the leaders is often less massive, and also rather transient in nature. Competition and fickleness are so considerable that the chances that social and religious movements take on a permanent character decrease.

These groups, neotribes, social movements, are the fulfilment of the desire to belong. The desire changes the process of modernisation as much as its fulfilment does. Because of the de-institutionalisation of religion, religious communities or parishes are reduced to secondary importance. The sacralisation of the group, the flight from contingency, away from the random and the wilful, by means of the worship of a key figure, still takes place, but now more or less separated from tradition and partly taken over by commerce.

This often implicit collective religiosity ensures that religion will not disappear from public space.

The Development of Background Notions

Background notions are those seemingly self-evident notions which we unconsciously base our thinking upon, without being aware of it. They are the categories to which thoughts and emotions conform almost automatically, often without people being aware of it. These background notions determine what is thinkable and what isn't. They are the backbone of our thinking, the stage on which the human drama is performed. Some of these background notions are religious, in two ways: in terms of content, and functionally.

Let us first look at the matter of content. For many people, God, or the divine, is the core of their background notions. All lines of reasoning ultimately lead to the will of God. God is the ultimate source of everything, and also where everything leads, on which everything depends.

This is where secularisation has had a major impact. The process of secularisation has pushed God away. He has been replaced by inner worldly values where the background notions are concerned. They have been rationalised and routinised. And so, the world that used to be an enchanted garden, became an order governed by the laws of nature. Initially, these were ascribed to God, but were gradually considered to be blind. This is where secularisation seems to have had its greatest impact.

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Nevertheless, it is an open question to what extent God really disappeared from the background notions. Taking his cues from Nietzsche, the English philosopher John Gray (2007) shows that even the most secular background notions owe fealty to the Christian tradition. To Nietzsche, the striving for justice and humanity, and the belief in progress, were Christianity in a secular disguise. This fealty should not be cause for surprise, if we assume that Charles Taylor (2007) is right, and that many secular background notions came from the pious wish on the part of thinkers to reinforce its religious significance. In this process, the background notions have been robbed of their magic, routinised, and become inner worldly. But the force of rationalisation has caused them to gain credibility.

As an example of a background notion that plays a role in my argument, we will take one last look at individual liberty. It is a background notion that ultimately derives from the Gospel. Over the past few centuries, this notion expanded immensely. You could be held responsible for everything individually, because you had a choice. In the past, there only used to be a choice between good and evil: now, your individual and even your social identity is supposed to be a choice. What religion you adhere to is also a choice. Mention is often made of a market for religion. The concept of a market for religion has come into being as a consequence of the process of modernisation, where the presupposition is that everything should be a personal choice.

Because of these changes in the background notions, the notion of religion changes. This change is a de-institutionalisation. Religion disappears as a fixed background notion, and is subordinated to the background notion of freedom of choice.

From the perspective of content, we see a strong degree of secularisation, and the question is: when do background notions lose their religious character?

This question brings us to the second way in which background notions are religious: in a functional sense. There is a number of background notions that counteract the randomness and the contingency. They are sacred values, which do not allow for discussion, and discussion about which is even extremely painful. These sacred values fall within our working definition of religion.

The background notions remain matters of faith that cannot be supported by further arguments. They are secularised, that is to say, oriented on this world, and they are de-institutionalised, that is to say, separated from their original context, the church. But they are also partly re-institutionalised, for instance, in the public opinion. Its urgency and

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relevance have therefore increased enormously. Its duration seems to be unlimited and it is clearly not a private system of belief.

But can we still in all truthfulness talk about religion? Or is this a system of belief that can get by without the numinous? The numinous has become implicit, and also more feeble. It appears as if we have a system of belief that is so strong, and so far beyond doubt, that it can manage without the numinous. That does not mean that it is a system that defends against attacks from outside with strategies that are normally used by institutional religions, and that contain a numinous component, such as demonisation.

Conclusion: The Modernisation of Religion

Looking back at our analysis, we can come to the conclusion that religion is modernising: it adapts to modern society, and to the process of modernisation. This means privatisation of religion, among other things. But this is just one of many variables that are part of the process of modernisation, just like secularisation and de-institutionalisation. The impact of modernisation is much more complex. Rather than talking about a privatisation of religion, we should simply refer to a modernisation of religion. In the process, we should distance ourselves from the idea that religion is disappearing from society.

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