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14

The 'rise' of the alternatives: some implications

An overview of alternative religions in Western societies suggests that they come in an infinite variety of forms, from quasi-Christian sects, to imported ancient world religions, to entirely new religious movements and quasi-religions. If, collectively, they are replacing mainstream Christianity, it might be argued that a reversal in the decline of religion is taking place and that long-held sociological views regarding the inevitability of the process of secularization (as defined as the 'decline of religion') are being brought into question. In short, the expression may have changed, but it could well be that a demand for religiosity is still to be observed. This final chapter explores these themes.

The alternatives: a revival of religion?

The possibility of a religious revival invariably relates to the question of the true social significance of the alternative religions and their real relevance, if any, beyond offering something positive for those who are directly involved. Hence, it might be conjectured that they are not just marginal forms of religion but are also very peripheral aspects of social life, and that from a historical and long-term perspective the evidence still points towards an overall demise of religion in Western societies. Some commentators such as Steve Bruce (1996b) would suggest that the so-called 'new religiosity' implicit in the rise of many of the 'alternatives' does not make up for the decline of traditional Christianity. The alleged revival of religion appears not to correspond, in any meaningful way, with the commitment that previous generations expressed towards the Christian faith. Furthermore, on the evidence of the last few decades, Bruce argues, there is not really a great deal of religion to be observed and what does exist scarcely constitutes religion at all.

According to Bruce, the number of people who have shown any interest in alternative religions is minute. He maintains that, outside sectarian and fundamentalist forms of religion and those of the ethnic minorities, the commitment to most is slight. The more popular of the newer religions flaunt 'products' which are essentially secular and deal with the here and now rather than being concerned with salvation in the next world. They also fail to offer all-embracing systems of morality. Rather scathingly, Bruce suggests that of the newer alternative religions 'most are consumed by people as a slight flavouring to their mundane lives' (Bruce 1996b, 272-3). Moreover,

they are limited to particular social groups. These are overwhelmingly the educated and wealthier members of the middle-classes, who are sufficiently affluent to subscribe to a range of client and audience cults.

There is another related issue that must be taken into account when considering the social significance of the 'alternatives'. Quasi-religions, holistic religions, and what are frequently known as self-spiritualities, appear in many respects to depart from traditionally accepted definitions of religion. This arguably highlights the fact that practically anything can be regarded as religion by using broad criteria and this may even include social phenomena which categorically deny being religious in nature. It may be, then, that any claim to the resurgence of religion ultimately depends on what is meant by the term. Sociologically speaking, this raises both epistemological and ideological issues, so that what constitutes religion is ultimately in the eye of the beholder.

It is beyond the scope of this book to speculate upon the 'true' level of religiosity among the range of alternatives on offer. Indeed, this would be a thankless and impossible task. However, there is another criterion by which to gauge their wider social impact and this may be interpreted as evidence of the relentless growth of secularity. In the early twenty-first-century, religion appears to be increasingly controversial. Whereas, in the 1950s and the 1960s, religion was generally seen as a relatively benign force in society, by the 1980s it had become more and more a politicized topic. Most of the controversies were related to the religious fringe, although mainstream Christianity by no means escaped. There were several principal reasons why this was so. Firstly, NRMs engendered debates as to what is or is not a religion. This was particularly in relation to legal litigations including the alleged abuse of members. Secondly, the state appears to increasingly touch upon some of the traditional rights of religion of all types, such as the freedom to have independent schools for the children of religious minorities. Thirdly, some religions have sought to advance and extend their interests in an increasingly pluralist society. Where there is now no longer one accepted religious truth, religions of all kinds struggle to be recognized and to win over converts in a world where there is the choice not to believe. It is this matter of choice, however, that has perhaps impacted most negatively on mainstream Christianity as the decline in religious socialization of younger generations begins to take its toll. In short, young people are increasingly choosing not to attend church or subscribe to the major tenets of the faith.

The demise of mainstream Christianity revisited

Evidence produced by the European Values Survey over a number of years shows that in Europe there is at least an apparent decline of Christianity in terms of its core doctrines (see Table 7). There is also an indication that some of those which do remain have been significantly transformed. The survey shows that in Europe belief in traditional Christianity has been undermined over a number of decades. Partly, this is because of the rise of competing forms of religiosity such as the new religions and the faiths of ethnic minorities, while levels of disbelief, or at least unconventional interpretations of Christian teachings, have also increased.

Table 7 Erosion of the Christian tradition: international patterns

% who say they believe in	Patterns of belief in God and in life after death				
	Britain	Ireland	France	Denmark	European average
God	76%	95%	62%	58%	75%
A personal God	31%	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	32%
Absolute guidelines for telling good and evil	28%	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	26%
Life after death	24%	76%	35%	26%	43%
Heaven	57%	83%	27%	17%	40%
Hell	27%	54%	15%	8%	23%
Reincarnation	27%	26%	22%	11%	21%
% who are definite atheists	9%	2%	19%	21%	11%

Source: Based on the European Values Survey data collected in 1981 (Harding, Phillips & Fogarty 1986, pp. 46-7; Gerard 1985, pp. 60-1).

Note: n.a. = not available

Undoubtedly, there are problems with interpreting such statistics. However, certain trends are clear (Davies 1999). Above all, there no longer remains the comprehensive worldview of some two thousand years that brought together Christian dogma regarding creation, moral behaviour, and afterlife beliefs. In fact, in the secular Europe of today the connections between these aspects of the faith have undergone fragmentation. Whereas the past was epitomized by one form or another of a strongly integrated system of afterlife, morality, and creation belief, in which death was followed by rewards or punishment, for most European people today there is little connection between them. Beyond this appraisal, there are a number of other important conclusions to be made. Firstly, there is a low proportion of the general European population who believe in a personal God. This is particularly so in view of the high proportion of believers in some kind of God that has only a few attributes of the Christian God, as well as the low number of convinced atheists. Secondly, there is a low proportion who believe in an absolute morality of right and wrong. Thirdly, there is a low proportion of believers in the existence of hell, which is well below the proportions of the same populations who believe in some form of afterlife (Catholicism in Ireland nonetheless remains closely attached to the doctrine of hell).

More detailed studies have shown a complicated picture. A more recent survey in Sweden (arguably one of the most secular of societies there is) shows that a high percentage (79 per cent) of the population believe in a 'personal God' but only 7 per

cent of these were confessing Christians (Table 8). The research also indicated that the younger generation subscribes to a wide variety of beliefs concerning the paranormal and astrology (Table 9). Again, these statistics are open to interpretation and may be given to suggest that a belief in alternative forms of religion may prevail in the future at the expense of Christianity. The author of the research, Ulf Sjödin (2002), concludes that while a belief in the paranormal and the occult constitute ideologies for a large part of the Swedish population, they are not visible in organized forms. Swedes continue to uphold beliefs in the afterlife and supernatural powers but these are not considered to be associated with inherited religious dogmas. There is thus a kind of private or invisible religion which is founded on many of the doctrines of alternative religions. Sjödin notes, however, that further research needs to be conducted on how important, or central, these values are in the individual's outlook on life. They may turn out to be, he suggests, peripheral and thus fairly harmless and tolerable in a democratic, pluralist society.

Table 8 Beliefs in Sweden

Belief in	Those agreeing to items versus religious self-assessment			
	Confessing Christianity	Religious my own way	I can't say	Not religious
	(7%)	(44%)	(27%)	(22%)
Personal God	79	20	5	1
Lifeforce	18	58	39	24
Life after death	88	57	33	15
Spiritualism	32	42	22	17
Preliminary signs	88	88	78	77
UFOs	9	28	26	20

Source: Adapted from Sjödin, U. (2002) 'The Swedes and the Paranormal', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 17 (1), 75–85.

One notable feature of these statistics is the high percentage of believers in reincarnation, given that it is not part of and indeed is repugnant to the European Christian tradition. It is now apparent that nearly half the people of Europe believe in some kind of life after death, although they do not know exactly what. About a quarter of those surveyed believed in reincarnation. This development is not new. In 1955, some 25 per cent of English people held such a view – a quarter of all those who believed in any kind of afterlife (Davies 1999). The Western believers, however, are not following Hindu teachings of *karma* in that they do not see themselves having been or likely to return as some other species, but specifically human.

Table 9 Swedish youth's belief in the paranormal

		Girls	Boys
Generally paranormal	Low	31	61
	High	69	39
Astrology	Low	56	78
	High	44	22
UFOs	Low	68	61
	High	32	39
Reincarnation	Low	65	80
	High	35	20

Source: Adapted from Sjödin, U. (2002) 'The Swedes and the Paranormal', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 17 (1), 75–85.

Note: Low = Agrees to under 50% of the items
High = Agrees to over 50% of the items

Neither does reincarnation appear to be attached to any moral code of behaviour (Hanegraaff 1996, 283).

While these figures show a clear change in adherence to Christianity in Europe, the USA is often held to be different in many respects, in that its peoples adhere more rigidly to Christian beliefs and that the Christian fundamentalist revival is indicative of this. However, as we have seen, the impact of the movement is not considerable, while the country remains the home of many NRMs. Moreover, a poll conducted by Gallop in the USA indicated that 79 per cent of the American population feel that there is a distinction between religion and spirituality. Only 40 per cent admit to being religious, while 94 per cent consider themselves to be spiritual. 95 per cent believe in God, but only 57 per cent believe in heaven and 24 per cent in hell.

The evidence, then, suggests that some of the doctrines essential to Christianity do not now hold a central place in the belief systems of Western societies. Rather, they have become part of the mix 'n' match of contemporary religiosity, where traditional Christianity is integrated with a whole variety of non-Christian beliefs. Again, this is not a fresh development since the fragmentation of coherent Christian beliefs extends back into the nineteenth-century. Other forms of religiosity, would also seem to erode the monolithic Christian culture of the West. This is true of many other global religions. The debate about the incongruity of ethnic world faiths and Western culture has disguised the fact that in many respects the faiths of ethnic minorities have influenced Western society in discernible (and sometimes indiscernible) ways. This includes alternative medicines and therapies and meditation techniques derived from

non-Christian religions. At the same time, more broadly, such world religions as Buddhism have also clearly influenced a number of the NRMs and, more recently, the New Age.

The decline of Christianity: does it matter?

A number of politicians, church leaders, and church pressure groups have all lamented the decline of the so-called Christian society. For instance, the archbishop of Canterbury announced in 2000 that Britain had become 'an atheist society'. Certainly, it is evident that millions of people have been lost to the churches in the West. It is unlikely that these will be regained. Moreover, the separation of Church and state continues even in those European countries where it has traditionally been strong, and the Church's political power is now minimal. It is obvious that its influence cannot be compared with that of previous centuries. However, even this is open to interpretation. It may well be that the significance of the Church's previous political and state influence could be viewed as either a measurement of its impact on society, or a thorough-going compromise with this world.

It could be argued that Christianity may still provide the foundation of civil religion in Western societies. Evidence suggests that the faith continues to offer the trimmings for state occasions and affords some vague solace for large-scale natural and man-made disasters. In other words, it provides some indistinct ultimate reference point to aid individual and collective psychological restoration. However, it is increasingly difficult to suggest that Christianity provides a common and everyday basis of morality and a unified set of abstract beliefs. Some sociologists, such as Anthony and Robbins (1990), maintain that this may not be for the best – at least as far as American society is concerned. They believe that the decline in Christianity as expressed in civil religion has precipitated a moral malaise in American society which is evident in terms of sexual permissiveness, the increase in the divorce rate and family disintegration, rising crime, and the declining public support of established political institutions. These issues obviously provide fodder for conservative Christian groups ranging from traditional Roman Catholics to Protestant evangelicals who wish to reverse such changes.

Yet, all may not be lost. The plurality of religions in Western societies may have come to replace a civic religion based at least upon a nominal Christianity. This is evidenced in a more recent tentative assessment of religion in the USA by David Martin (1998), a long time observer of contemporary religion, who suggests that while religious belief in America is becoming increasingly diverse, the great majority of faiths carry the core cultural values of the USA. Writing in the *Independent* newspaper, Martin observed religion in Dallas, Texas. He found an infinite variety: Baptists, Korean churches, Armenian churches, voodooism, Pentecostalism, Sikhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism. Despite this diversity and the far-ranging traditions displayed, many of these faiths, in their own way, encapsulated American values of success, opportunity, freedom, responsibility, individual potential, and the historical celebration of all that is American. Hence, aspects of civic religion, it would

seem, can be seen in many of the 'alternatives' since they constitute an integrative, rather than a diversive, force.

Summary and future prospects

This volume has sought to describe, account for, and analyse a whole variety of expression of alternative religions. Like other aspects of cultural life in the West, such religions are extremely diverse and even categorizing them in the way that we have done so here scarcely does them justice. Similarly, it is difficult to draw conclusions and make speculations concerning future developments. It might be stated glibly that there will be both sectors of decline and of growth. For instance, some of the NRMs may have reached their apogee. Those that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Unification Church or the Jesus movement, are now dwindling and it is unlikely that they will stand the test of time. Indeed, Eileen Barker (1999, 15), a seasoned researcher of NRMs, suggests that despite the large number of new religions and the present sizeable membership of a number of them, there is no indication that any one movement is likely to become a major religious tradition in the future. Those that do remain are also undergoing significant transformations. As Martin (1991) notes, those of a more world-rejecting type are increasingly inclined to accommodate themselves with the world in order to survive and sustain their membership. It is a recognition that few people seek a full commitment and immersion in a radically different and totally religious way of life.

Despite the concerns of some, it is possible to suggest that in a largely secular society, religion, of whatever kind, is so insignificant as to have few major repercussions for its social environment as either a stabilizing force or a disruptive one. What appears to be the case, however, is that the new religions, much like the old, reflect prevailing culture. As the Western way of life has undergone considerable transformation, so has religion. This should not surprise or alarm. New forms are increasingly approximating what Heelas (1996) calls the 'de-traditionalized spiritualities of life', where ancient religions are reinvented for the various and complex needs of individuals in contemporary society, but in doing so may engender a form of social integration. There is a preoccupation with all aspects of human potential and perfection, identity construction, and even worship of the self. Much is exemplified by the New Age. In many respects, it is that form of religiosity most removed from traditional Christianity which historically presented a codified doctrinal system and abstract morality. Nonetheless, such new expressions of religion may still provide significance and meaning and, in their holistic approach and emphasis on the environment, present a morality for future generations.

For many sociologists of religion, the areas of expansion are largely accepted to be the cultic religions and various strands of the New Age movement, the religions of various ethnic minorities, and expressions of world faiths of a fundamentalist nature. Simultaneously, a relatively new type of liberal and tolerant spirituality appears to be spreading in radically different dimensions – typically in the form of 'holistic' spirituality or self-spirituality. To these growth areas can be added, so it may be argued, the

more hidden aspects of religiosity – particularly the emergence of infinite varieties of quasi-religions, which satisfy the needs of some people for spirituality and meaning. It might also be conjectured that, in the future, many of these religions will prove to be transitory. Movements may tend to rise, grow, and disintegrate quickly. On the other hand, they may be rapidly transformed in line with contemporary Western culture changes. In this respect, their future remains unpredictable. Much will be linked to the fortunes of religion per se, alternative or otherwise. It is likely that in a pluralist society there will be no such designations as 'mainstream' and 'alternatives', but just a myriad of faiths and spiritualities that are reduced to a lifestyle choice for those who seek to indulge.

