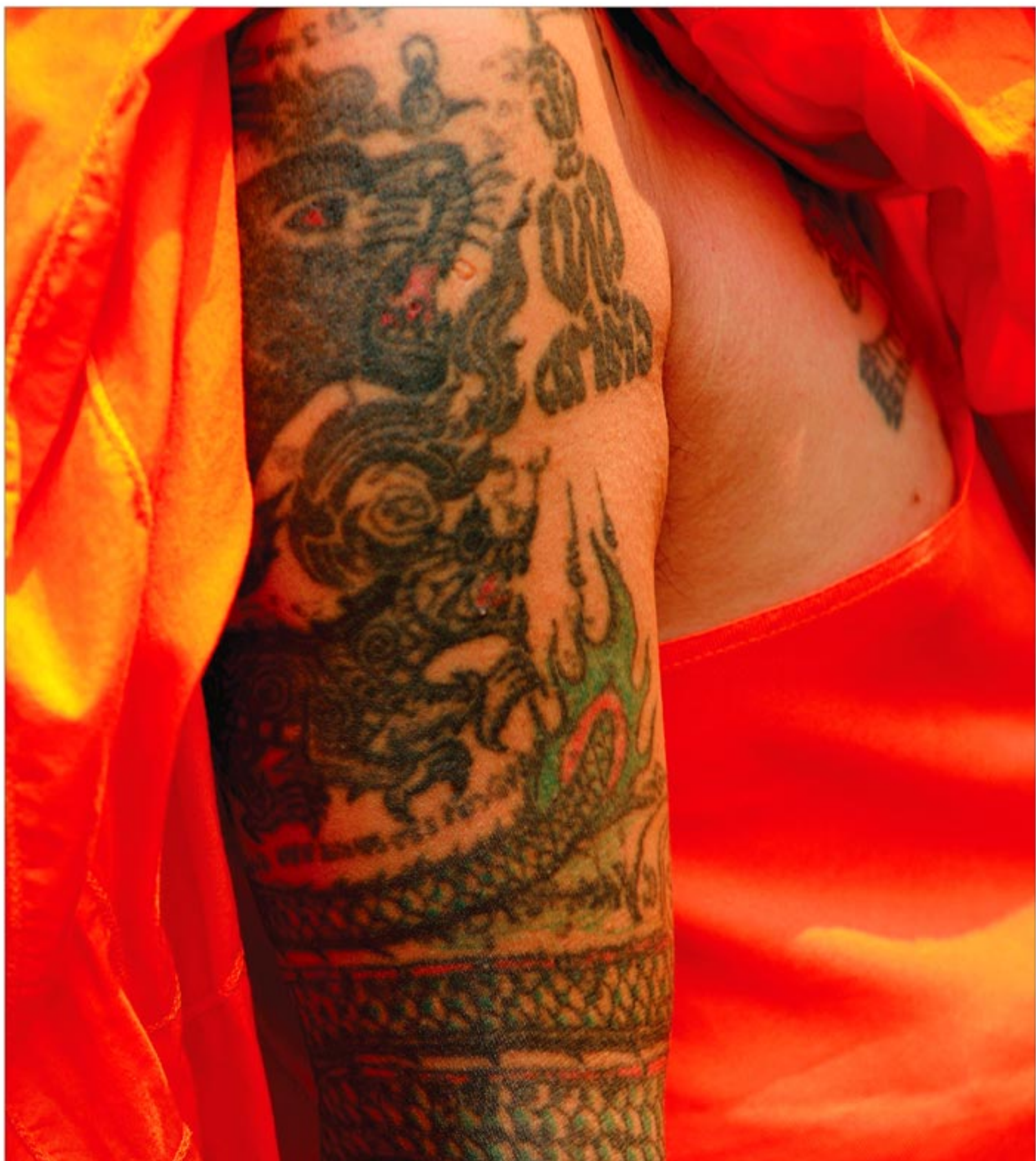


Philip A Mellor and Chris Shilling



Sociology of the Sacred

*Religion, Embodiment
and Social Change*



Sociology of the Sacred

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Introduction

This book explores the relationship between religion and secularization in the contemporary global era. In so doing, it seeks to advance sociological debates about how an increasing range of phenomena have come to be constructed and experienced as sacred, or extraordinary, and thereby contain the potential to shape social action in significant ways. These debates characteristically treat the category of the sacred as unitary, typically reflecting religious or quasi-religious processes. In contrast, we argue that there exist distinct, competing and interacting modalities of the sacred; a position attentive to the existence of this-worldly (secular) as well as the other-worldly (religious) manifestations of objects, relationships and ideas that are set apart from the mundane. Introducing what we identify as socio-religious, transcendent, bio-political and bio-economic modalities of the sacred, we seek to re-structure discussions of secularization by focusing on the variable capacities of these very different extraordinary forces to enframe and shape people's embodied experiences. These modalities are especially important for our concerns because of their implications for the corporeal and cognitive terrain on which forms of religious habitus are nurtured or impeded, and it is the future of these forms of habitus that remain vital for, yet are marginalized within, recent debates about secularization and the revitalization of religion.

In broad terms, these debates about religion and secularization appear for many to have been settled. Most recent analysts agree that there has, during the last few decades, been a global resurgence of particular religions, as well as a growth in social and cultural phenomena designated sacred. It is now common, indeed, to regard previously influential sociological models of secularization as fundamentally mistaken, with visions of a 'post-secular' age promoted as preferable bases from which to assess these issues (e.g. Berger, 1999; Habermas, 2008, 2010). Opposing this growing consensus, we suggest that processes of secularization remain central to the extraordinary power and status accorded to bio-economic and bio-political forces affecting the

world today.¹ Before developing this argument, though, it is necessary to disentangle the claims and analytical conflations characteristic of discussions in this area in order to show why they are problematic.

Secularization is commonly understood in existing debates as a process of change wherein the expanding scope and importance of non-religious aspects of social and cultural life marginalize both religion *and* the sacred. Conversely, de-secularization is frequently depicted as a reassertion of the significance of religion *and* the sacred relative to the secular (Demerath, 2000, 2007). The problem with such conceptions, however, is not only that 'the sacred' is assumed always to be in opposition to 'the secular', but also that it is regularly conflated with 'religion'. Insofar as religion is distinguished from the sacred, it tends to be seen as a particular institutional form of, or pattern of regulation relative to, experiences, beliefs, objects and practices that have an extraordinary character. Within this formulation, there is no space for recognizing that the sacred can assume secular as well as religious or quasi-religious manifestations.

These conceptions of religion, the sacred and the secular, are common, but do not help us understand the varied relationships that exist between these phenomena. In addressing this situation, we seek to enhance understandings of secularization, in terms of the declining social significance of religion, by examining how such processes can include the colonization of religious forms and identities by bio-economic and bio-political modalities of the sacred. Here, we view religion specifically as forms of belief and practice oriented towards other-worldly forms of sacred authority that have implications for this-worldly existence. Thus, while particular religions operationalized on the basis of strong conceptions of the sacred have endured and expanded, we also identify circumstances wherein *secularizing modalities of the sacred* threaten to marginalize religion.

In developing our understanding of religion and secularization processes, we also highlight the significance of embodiment (i.e. the socially shaped, organic foundations associated with human frailties, capabilities and proficiencies). There has been much recent interest in the body and religion, but this is seldom evident in secularization debates. Yet religious and secular modalities of the sacred enframe embodied experiences in diverse ways. The significance of this is that such enframings can shape people's practices and beliefs, thereby structuring the terrain on which dispositional orientations towards religion (what we refer to as forms of religious

habitus) are created or obstructed. The widely contrasting ways in which lived experience can be shaped means that we should not expect there to be a unitary experience of any of these modalities (in terms, for example, of a universal, phenomenological encounter with the 'numinous' [Otto, 1958; Eliade, 1959; James, 1983]). Nevertheless, the parameters in which particular forms of religious habitus can be forged are context specific, and are threatened by a secular colonization of experience.

The following chapters develop these introductory comments by examining how religious and secular modalities of the sacred enframe and shape embodied experiences in distinctive and sometimes radically opposed ways. Chapter 2 explicates the main features of these socio-religious, transcendent, bio-political and bio-economic modalities, before Chapters 3 to 6 focus on how they shape key areas of embodied experience identified within classical sociological theory as offering potential bridges into religious forms of life. Chapter 7 then explores the general terrain on which experience can nurture or impede forms of religious habitus in the contemporary era. Here, we suggest that people's unprecedented knowledge about, and experience of, coexisting and competing religious and secular modalities of the sacred (as a result of the global extension of capitalism, accelerated flows of information through digital media, and large scale migration) has *undermined* the traditional means through which forms of religious habitus are constructed, but *opens up* opportunities for the reflexive instauration of religious modes of being (Latour, 2011).

The aim of this first chapter, however, is to contextualize our approach within sociological theories of secularization, religion and the sacred. We begin by suggesting that common conceptions of the relationship between modernization and secularization actually *under-estimate* the importance of contemporary secularizing processes, before arguing that there is a tendency for analyses of social differentiation to overlook how segmentation not only constrains the exercise of religious authority, but also creates space for the expansion of *non-religious* modalities of sacred authority. Finally, we engage with the 'turn to the body' in sociological studies of religion by emphasizing the importance of *embodiment as a whole* (body and mind, feeling and cognition) for the construction of religious experiences, while also highlighting the capacity of contrasting modalities of the sacred to reinforce or undermine the grounds on which forms of religious habitus are created.

Modernization and Secularization

For much of the twentieth century, discussions about the fate of religion were contextualized within secularization narratives. There were dissenting voices, and debates about the variability of such processes (Martin, 1966, 1978, 1991), but the secularization thesis was unquestionably dominant, reflecting a broader sociological view that modernity was corrosive of religious identities and institutions. The central theoretical and methodological foundations for this thesis were established by sociology's founding figures, yet mirrored wider cultural assumptions: the declining significance of religion in technologically advanced societies was generally held to be self-evident. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, the public view of religion in the West began to change, and there also occurred a reorientation of the sociology of religion that resulted in the development of four ostensibly distinct positions regarding secularization.

The first, 'revitalization of religion', approach forcefully *rejects* the secularization thesis. Arguments concerning the revival of religion – including the renewed global prominence of religious conflict and the increasing use of religion in struggles for cultural recognition and citizenship – are here associated with theoretically oriented claims about humans' enduring religious needs. Whereas secularization theories argued that scientific knowledge and an emergent market of competing life-worlds 'disenchanted' the world, this approach emphasizes how such developments can *reinforce* religious identifications in contexts of rapid change. In assessing the influence of this argument, the volte-face of Berger (1999: 2) on the secularization thesis is particularly noteworthy. Previously one of its most influential exponents, Berger concluded that the world remains 'as furiously religious as ever' (see also Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, 1987; Warner, 1993; Riesebrodt, 2000, 2001).

A second position *moderates* rather than rejects secularization narratives, assessing them as useful insofar as they signal contingent, culturally and geographically partial and inherently reversible trends. From this perspective the secularization thesis was mistaken not in identifying elements of modernization that could corrode religion, but in assuming these resulted in *irreversible* and *uniform* change. The idea that secular elements *inevitably* marginalize, transform and undermine religious beliefs, practices and identities is, therefore, rejected. Norris and Inglehart (2004) provide a powerful articulation of this argument, exhibiting attentiveness to patterns of extensive

and limited secularization across the globe, *and* to contexts wherein rapid modernization has provoked significant de-secularization (see also Martin, 1966, 1978, 2005; Beyer, 2007; Demerath, 2007; Gorski and Altinordu, 2008).

While these 'revitalization of religion' and 'moderate secularization' positions focus on evolving relationships between religious and secular phenomena, a third, 'resurgence of the sacred', approach redirects attention away from the boundaries of the religious and the secular. Here, 'the sacred' is expanded to such a degree that it is understood to include, or transcend, both terms, while questions about secularization appear to be rendered irrelevant by this perspective. This is not because it holds that religion has necessarily been revitalized, but because of its identification of an increasingly significant and broad range of secular as well as 'spiritual' sacred phenomena. Lynch's (2012) outline of a 'sociology of the sacred' distinct from the 'sociology of religion' is one example of this argument: since the sacred is associated with a 'communicative structure' of non-contingent norms and values expressed through symbols, cognitive orientations and bodily emotions, recurrent patterns of sacralization become important *regardless* of whether these are categorized or experienced as secular or religious (see also Alexander, 1988; Knott, 2005; Knott and Franks, 2007; Nynäs et al., 2012).

A fourth position, in contrast, continues to espouse a 'strong secularization thesis'. This re-emphasizes a correlation between modernization and secularization with regard to the corrosive effects on religious belief and practice of post-traditional patterns of individualism. It also highlights the diminishing social and cultural significance of religion that follows from the structural and functional differentiation of modern societies. Supported by empirical data strongly indicative of a decline in explicit religious commitments in Europe and the US, alongside ambiguous but suggestive data in terms of secularization patterns across other parts of the globe, Bruce (2003, 2006) is a key exponent of this argument. This is evident in his scepticism concerning whether instances of religious revival or growth necessarily call into question a correlation between modernization and secularization, and in his criticisms of scholarly attempts to displace questions about secularization by renaming as 'religious' or 'sacred' an increasing range of secular phenomena (Inglehart, 1997; Norris and Inglehart, 2004).

These 'revitalization of religion', 'moderate secularization', 'resurgence of the sacred' and 'strong secularization' positions are often understood to be incommensurate, yet we suggest that, despite

appearances, they exhibit *considerable convergences* in recognizing the *advance of secularization*. Indeed, the correlation between modernization and secularization prominent in strong secularization accounts (viewed as setting these against their competitors [Berger, 1999; Bruce, 2006: 35; Davie, 2010]) is actually *presupposed* in numerous accounts of revitalized religion, as well as in moderate secularization accounts. This is evident in their acknowledgement of a global trend for modern societies to become structurally differentiated into a number of semi-autonomous spheres – the political, religious, economic, etc. – each possessed of their own character and rationality (Parsons, 1960; Bell, 1977; Martin, 1978; Luhmann, 1985; Mouzelis, 2012). The suggestion here is that religion is increasingly located – at least within the ‘macro’ level of society – in a distinctive institutional space, constraining its capacity to structure other institutions, and existing as one life sphere within an economy of others that shape human experience in diverse ways (Bruce, 2011; Mouzelis, 2012: 208–10). Indeed, Martin (2005, 2011), a long-standing critic of strong versions of secularization theory, has nonetheless argued that structural differentiation and the consequent institutional segmentation of religion is one aspect of secularization that is, ultimately, *irreversible* (Mouzelis, 2012: 213).

Accounts of the resurgent sacred appear to offer a greater challenge to claims of a correlation between modernization and secularization. This is again questionable, though, as evident in two key manifestations of this approach. First, following Durkheim’s (1995) focus on the role of the sacred in incorporating individuals into symbolic and experiential communities, a distinction is frequently drawn between orthodox, institutional forms of religion, *increasingly incapable of fulfilling this role*, and forms of heterodox spirituality or sacred norms and experiences of resurgent significance. Here, rather than being decisively rejected, the focus on the resurgent sacred cannot conceal the implicit acceptance of a correlation between modernization and secularization with regard to institutional religion. This mirrors Luckmann’s (1967) distinction between ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ forms of religion, recapitulating his argument that secularization undermines the former in favour of the latter (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Heelas, 2006: 53; Lynch, 2012: 3–4, 17). In consequence, it might be said that such accounts actually *accept* key features of strong accounts of secularization, despite rejecting the idea that the sacred has been undermined.

A second manifestation of this resurgent sacred approach might be seen as more radical. This rejects the terms ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’,

and thus the notion that there exists a structural differentiation between them, on the basis that these reflect the 'epistemic hegemony' of a Western and Christian world-view and history, possessing little applicability to non-Western societies (Asad, 1993; Gorski and Altinordu, 2008; Turner, 2010a: xiv; Casanova, 2012: 253; King, 2013; see also Beckford, 2003). The problem with this stance, however, is that ignores the political *reality* of conflicts over the differentiation of the religious and the secular in contexts such as Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, North Africa, Egypt, Israel, South East Asia and China (Demerath, 2007: 64). It also fails to grasp how differentiation has spread throughout globalized societies (even if non-Western regions of the world have appropriated it in a 'glocalizing' form, particularizing it according to local circumstances [Beyer, 2007: 110]). Casanova (2012: 41), for example, accepts that for Western *and* non-Western societies:

the cosmic order is increasingly defined by modern science and technology; the social order is increasingly defined by the interlocking of citizenship, 'democratic' states, market economies, and mediatic public spheres; and the moral order is increasingly defined by the calculations of rights-bearing individual agents, claiming human dignity, equality, and the pursuit of happiness.

In short, the four positions outlined are less distinct than they appear to be when it comes to acknowledging (even if only implicitly) the considerable importance of secularization, while there is also a tendency within them to elide the sacred with religion. The limited convergences between them, indeed, suggest that we need to interrogate further whether there exists a secularizing 'socio-logic' to modern societal changes (Bruce, 2006: 35), and what the precise role of the sacred is in such developments. Of immediate significance in this regard is the importance of social differentiation and de-differentiation, recognized variously in the above positions, for the scope of *worldly* and *other-worldly* authorities.

Differentiation, De-Differentiation and Other-Worldly Authority

We have already noted that, despite ostensibly rejecting a correlation between secularization and modernization, accounts of the revitalization of religion tend to acknowledge a global trend for modern societies to become structurally differentiated into a

number of semi-autonomous spheres. In this respect, theorists espousing this position have mostly avoided pitching their arguments with reference to its 'macro-level' institutional location, focusing instead on 'meso-level' developments. It is *beneath* the institutional structures of society – but manifest variously in the civic sphere, social movements, local and regional groups, families, and the life-worlds of individuals – that religious resurgence is discovered (Martin, 1978, 2011; Riesebrodt, 2001; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Beyer, 2007; Demerath, 2007; Gorski and Altinordu, 2008). The acknowledgement of a significant divide between macro- and meso-levels, however, has major implications for the scope and influence of religious authority.

This is clear in the writings of those rational choice theorists who argue for the revitalization of religion on the basis of a strong differentiation of macro- from meso-level. They identify the proliferation of religious options in the modern era as evidence of people's essential religiosity, explaining away *apparent* secularization as a 'supply-side' failure of religious organizations, largely within monopoly situations, to provide what consumers need (Warner, 1993; Stark, 1999; Gorski and Altinordu, 2008: 58). Nonetheless, rational choice theorists still accept that the differentiation of modern societies has reduced the power and social authority of churches: 'the primary aspects of public life' are no longer 'suffused with religious symbols, rhetoric or ritual' (Stark, 1999: 4–5; Demerath, 2007: 63).

A similar use of macro- and meso-level differentiation is made in relation to those contrasting claims regarding the revitalization of religion within an emergent 'post-secular' modernity (see Harrington, 2007; Boeve, 2008; Braidotti, 2008; Dalferth, 2010; Davie, 2010; Lyon, 2010; McLennan, 2010; Nynäs et al., 2012). Thus, Habermas's (2008) declaration of the arrival of a 'post-secular age' co-exists with his ongoing emphasis on the functional differentiation of religion at the macro-level of modern societies (Beckford, 2012: 8). Taylor (2007), similarly, identifies a powerful 'yearning for transcendence' in modern societies but recognizes the pervasive macro-level constraints upon it within the 'immanent frame' of modernity (Warner et al., 2010: 6). Sources of formal religious authority are, again, circumscribed within the differentiated spheres of polity and economy, if not in relation to the views and actions of private individuals.

This distinction between macro-level structural differentiation and meso-level religious vitality usefully enables us to identify distinctive religious trajectories within society and acknowledge the significance of patterns of de-secularization *within certain limits*.

Casanova (1994, 2006, 2012) exemplifies this when observing how macro-level secularization can actually encourage meso-level de-secularization. Shorn of its overarching legitimating role for society, 'religions can become movements and pressure groups that vie with rivals in the public sphere', with religious authority becoming increasingly efficacious *outside* the state (Dobbelaere, 1988, 1989; Gorski and Altinordu, 2008: 58). Nonetheless, while this distinction entails recognizing emergent 'levels' within society, and how the contrasting religious trajectories with which they may be associated can interact and change each other over time, these patterns of change are heavily weighted in one direction. There seems little scope for meso-level religious vitality to *enhance* the institutional reach of religious authority at a macro-level (Casanova, 2012: 30).

Contrary to how they are often perceived, then, accounts of the revitalization of religion and religious authority at the meso-level often *reinforce* conclusions about macro-level secularization. Nonetheless, as recent events in Egypt suggest, strong religious convictions can contest macro-level differentiation rather than exhibit passive acceptance of its irreversibility. As such, it would be wrong to assume that questions of the social significance of religious authority relative to patterns of differentiation are settled. It is equally questionable to exclude the possibility that the capacities of secularizing processes to spread in a de-differentiating manner are necessarily constrained by the meso-level resurgence of religion. Here, questions concerning the problematization of religious authority that is, in variable degrees, evident at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of social life suggest a need for a more flexible understanding of how patterns of differentiation and de-differentiation shape the relationship between secularizing and de-secularizing processes.

In this respect, Chaves (1994: 751) has drawn upon contrasting assessments of differentiation in order to emphasize the contingent, political, and often conflict-ridden relationships between separate societal spheres (see Luhmann, 1982, 1990; Alexander, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Friedland and Alford, 1991). Utilizing Dobbelaere's (1981, 1985, 1987) multi-dimensional model of secularization, he identifies three levels at which declining religious authority can, but does not necessarily, occur. At the macro-level, it can be seen in the increasing inability of religious elites to exercise influence over other institutional sectors. At the meso-level, its evidence is manifest in the increasing tendency of many religious organizations to conform to, or reshape themselves in the light of, distinctively secular social, cultural or political concerns. At the micro-level, it

emerges through the degree to which individual choices and actions are increasingly free of religious control (Chaves, 1994: 757).

On this basis, it is possible to distinguish between high levels of macro-level secularization characteristic of Western societies, and low levels characteristic of societies such as Iran, where religious authority has been re-exerted over other institutional spheres, while also being attentive to intra-society variations. In certain areas of US culture, for example, meso- as well as micro-level secularization can be weak (e.g. among conservative Protestant and African American communities), though in the culture as a whole religion tends to operate restrictedly as a *cultural resource*, that is, as symbols or rhetorical sources which can be drawn upon voluntarily for various purposes (Chaves, 1994: 761). This is quite different from Iran, a country in which religious authorities control meso- and micro-level activities, though there are limits to this even in such a context. Beyer's (1993) account of how internal conflicts surrounding de-differentiation became apparent after the 'theocratic triumph' of the mullahs in the Iranian revolution, and continue to be evident, is relevant here. As Chaves (1994: 766) puts it, 'there seem to be structural limits to religious authority's capacity to impose itself in a society that participates at all in a global institutional environment that is highly secularized'.

These analyses of social differentiation helpfully contextualize debates about secularization in relation to the variable distribution of religious authority, but their focus on the relationship between religious and non-religious authority either conflates religion with the sacred, or makes the latter a residual category. Rather than being explored as important in their own right, sacred phenomena that effect a displacement of other-worldly referents by secular agents of various sorts (e.g. much of the 'civil religion' of the US) are simply judged to be *not religious* (Chaves, 1994: 771). This limitation is evident in Chaves's (1994: 750–2) proposal that studies of secularization should focus purely on religious authority (defined as control of access via *other-worldly legitimations* to certain cultural goods of a positive [e.g. eternal life] or negative [e.g. meaninglessness] nature). His suggestion envisages a neatly delineated field for analysis, but if we wish to comprehend the wider character of the world we should note Fenn's (1978, 1982) interest in how the decline of religious authority has been accompanied by an increase in the visibility and significance of *non-religious forms of sacred authority*. These forms have been manifest variously in secular agencies, and 'occult' spiritualities, that borrow the authority of sacred symbols for their own ends (Fenn, 1978: 25, 36–7).

Fenn is here pointing towards the possibility that secularization can be accompanied by both a shrinkage of religious forms of authority and an *expansion* of the scope of non-religious forms of sacred authority (see also Demerath, 2000: 3).

This concern with religious authority reinforces the importance of disentangling the sacred from the religious, yet if we are to extend further our understanding of debates about secularization we need to recognize how the issues we have been exploring are themselves grounded in contrasting embodied experiences, practices and cognitive orientations. Those who have written about the contemporary fate of religion and the sacred have tended to adopt one of two major approaches towards this grounding; one that focuses on cognitive issues of belief, the other on more obviously ‘enfleshed’ matters of sensation and emotion.

Embodiment(s) of Religion and of the Sacred

In accounting for the inherently corrosive impact of modern life upon religion, exponents of secularization have focused frequently on issues of cognition, particularly in their explorations of the plausibility of religious *beliefs*. Berger (1967), for example, suggested that religion loses its capacity in increasingly differentiated societies to provide an overarching *meaningful* order, as its belief systems are relativized by a plurality of others and undermined by science. Similarly, Bruce’s (2010: 135) explorations of the political, structural and economic aspects of secularization identify the modern undermining of the plausibility of religious belief as ‘the bottom line’ in debates about the issue.

This focus on cognition highlights the importance of other-worldly belief systems for religious life, but others who share this concern for belief have drawn opposing conclusions about its sustainability in the contemporary era. The suggestion that modernity’s intellectual pluralism creates market conditions that allow religious certitudes to flourish is one example of this (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, 1987; Warner, 1993, 1997; Iannaccone, 1995, 1997). A similarly cognitive focus informs Habermas’s post-secular view of religion as a source of *epistemic content* that can, under certain conditions, shape public debate and communicative interaction (Braeckman, 2009: 284). So too does it influence Giddens’s (1991) and Norris and Inglehart’s (2004) association of revitalized religion with *propositional certainties* that can shield people from the existential insecurities engendered by rapid social change. Here,

religious belief offers a cognitive prophylactic against societies characterized by accelerated rationalization and differentiation.

In contrast to this focus on belief, the second approach to questions concerning the persistence or diminution of religious or sacred forces within society adopts a more 'carnal' orientation. Here, conceptions of 'religion as belief' are judged to be predicated on early-modern Protestant models of religiosity, to some extent replicated in the Catholic Counter-Reformation, wherein enfolded forms of religious life gave way to those 'in the head' (Asad, 1993; Taylor, 2007: 554). Taking issue with this specificity, sociological and anthropological analyses of the ritual diversity, and the sensual and emotional experiences inherent to immersion within forms of sacred life, have focused on material culture (Morgan, 2010), 'aesthetic formations' (Meyer, 2010a, 2010b), and bodily and affectual reconstruction (Turner, 1984, 1991; Feder et al., 1989; Csordas, 1990, 1994; McGuire, 1990; Bell, 1992; Coakley, 1997; Vásquez, 2011). These approaches usefully highlight a broader range of enfolded phenomena central to experiences of the sacred, religious or otherwise, than those characteristic of cognitively-focused secularization narratives. Nevertheless, they tend to underplay the importance of people's reflexive engagements with doctrinal considerations, and at times overlook the constraints that rationalization and differentiation can place upon the social significance of bodily sensations of the religious or the sacred.

Rather than simply opposing the cognitive orientation of much secularization theory to the focus on sensory and sensual forms of religious or sacred life, we suggest it is necessary to adopt a broader view of the embodied, experiential grounding for religious and secular phenomena. Some religious forms are clearly more cognitively oriented than others, for example, but even those that exhibit a strong intellectual focus on regulating, domesticating or repressing certain emotional orientations can nonetheless be understood to be engaged in attempted *re-formations* of the embodied nature and experience of religious life (Mellor and Shilling, 1997). As constituted and enacted by embodied human beings, even religions of 'the head' are necessarily embodied (Taylor, 2007: 554; Strhan, 2012). Relatedly, while certain religions engage very directly with emotional and sensation forms, they nonetheless seek to enframe human feelings, thoughts and actions within other-worldly orientations, codified within systems of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

In moving towards a broader view of embodied experience, we adopt here a simple but flexible approach that encompasses the

above concerns with both mind/belief and body/sensation. Developed and deployed in various ways within sociological writings on the socio-natural characteristics of human embodiment (e.g. Elias, 1991, 2000; Frank, 1995; Burkitt, 1999; Shilling, 2005a, 2012; Freund, 2006, 2011), this approach recognizes that our experiences are shaped culturally, and through individual reflection, while also acknowledging their underpinning and co-constitution by an organic stratum. Specifically, embodied experiences of both religious and secular life involve the mutual interactions and co-constitutions that occur among our *physiological responses* to stimuli, the culturally variable manner in which we *feel* those responses, and our own *interpretive classification* of and *reflections* on such feelings, as well as on our existence in the world and cosmos more generally.

We can illustrate this approach through the example of being threatened physically as a result of one's religious affiliation and practices. This experience is associated typically with a physiological response referred to as the 'fight or flight' mechanism (that prepares the body to respond through an increase in adrenaline which raises heart rate and blood pressure). Provoked instantaneously by the presence of threat, this stimulus is felt ordinarily in terms of fear or aggression, and can be reflected on (if often only quickly before acting) variously via concepts and impressions associated with ideas such as injustice, revenge, sorrow, and concern for one's safety. These are individual reflections, but use a language common to a wider group, and vary normatively depending on our cultural, gendered, religious and other upbringing, as well as the interdependencies in which we are enmeshed. Thus, the experience of being threatened may result in similar physiological responses between people belonging to very different religions, but these responses can be felt and reflected on very differently if the religion to which one is affiliated demands robust defensive response or forgiveness.

Reflecting upon an inspiring passage in a holy book provides us with a contrasting illustration of these distinctive components, one that shows how experience can be looked at from the starting point of deliberation and not just physiological stimuli. Acquiring renewed insight through such contemplative activity can produce feelings of elation, feelings that stimulate the nervous systems and lend physiological impetus to the intensity of this experience (Damasio, 2000: 59–60). Taking seriously the importance of reflexive activities such as these, indeed, implies that experiences can be at least potentially modified through a deliberative process wherein feelings are stimulated by, and directed towards, objects and situations on the basis of

their having been *appraised* as meaningful (Papoulias and Callard, 2010; Leys, 2011).²

This account can be employed to investigate broad swathes of human life. In the context of debates about secularization and the modern world, however, it has particular utility in helping us grasp the nature and variable social consequences of phenomena that are encountered, designated and experienced as being of extraordinary importance.³ Sociology, religious studies and anthropology have long recognized the importance of the sacred for human experience. Etymologically rooted in ideas of 'making holy', consecrating or setting apart phenomena from mundane reality, Eliade's (1963) conception of *hierophany* raises the possibility of experiences of something 'wholly other' in this world that can possess religious consequences in terms of stimulus, feeling and thought. So too does James's (1983) interest in ineffable and noetic experiences provide insight into exceptional knowledge which can be reflected upon if not translated fully into cognitive conceptions. More foundational to sociology, Durkheim (1973, 1995) insists there are things considered sacred, 'set apart' from egoistic organic life, accessed through 'positive' and 'negative' rites that stimulate effervescent experiences possessed of the capacity to join to a collectivity imbued with forms of collective consciousness otherwise egoistic beings. Weber also explores how phenomena encountered as sacred, enchanted and charismatic stimulate in people an experience of a socially creative distance between extraordinary life and routinized existence (Weber, 1968: 789–90, 818–28, 1111–57; 1948 [1915]: 328; 1948 [1919a]: 155).

While writers such as Eliade and James tend to offer us a unitary, religious picture of sacred experience, however, Durkheim and Weber usefully examine how the sacred can be manifest in different, religious and secular, forms or, as we refer to them, modalities; modalities that serve to structure and pattern societies as well as the experiences of individuals within them. In this context, there are three particular aspects of their writings that have not been developed fully within contemporary debates on secularization, yet form a cornerstone of our approach. The first key feature is that, under certain circumstances and within particular limits, manifestations of the sacred can *steer* social life through the impact they have on people's embodied thoughts as well as feelings and habits. For Durkheim, manifestations of the extraordinary during collective assemblies arouse in participants 'passionate energies' that restructure individuals' feelings and thoughts in line with their symbolism, serving to