



*Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series in  
Association with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group*

# **FOUNDATIONS AND FUTURES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION**

Edited by  
Luke Doggett and Alp Arat



‘Celebrating forty years of the British Sociological Association’s Religion Study group, this book provides an important statement of where the sociology of religion has come from and a clear indication both of its ongoing vitality, and clear direction for the future.’

**Andrew M McKinnon**, University of Aberdeen, UK



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# Foundations and Futures in the Sociology of Religion

Since the sociology of religion became recognised as a distinct sub-discipline over the last century, the dominance of approaches taking their inspiration from the sociological classics has increasingly been challenged. Empirical findings have brought the notion of secularisation into question; and theorists have sought to deconstruct how we think of 'religion.' This collection appraises the continuing influence of the foundational approaches and places these in relation to newly emerging directions in the field.

The book is divided into four sections, each section containing one 'foundational' chapter written by an established academic followed by two 'futures' chapters contributed by emerging scholars in the sub-discipline. These chapters complement one another by placing the overview of future directions in the context of a survey of the development of the sociology of religion over the last century. Topics discussed in these chapters include lived religion, sexuality, ritual, religion and the media.

Combining erudite examinations of the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group's work so far with explorations of the future directions its research might take, this book is vital reading for any scholar whose work combines religious studies and sociology.

**Luke Doggett** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Criminology and Sociology at Kingston University. He was a member of the Kingston University Organising Team of the 2105 British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group's 40th anniversary conference. His research covers the role that myth and religion have played in human life, drawing upon philosophical material.

**Alp Arat** is a research assistant in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. His research in sociology of religion specialises in secularisation and postsecular theory, with a particular interest in contemporary practices of meditation. He is a former committee member at the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group, and he is currently working on the Leverhulme sponsored project titled 'Beyond Personal Wellbeing: Mapping the Social Production of Mindfulness in England and Wales.'

## **Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series in Association with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group**

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#### **Foundations and Futures in the Sociology of Religion**

*Edited by Luke Doggett and Alp Arat*

# Foundations and Futures in the Sociology of Religion

Edited by Luke Doggett  
and Alp Arat

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# Contributors

**Nancy T. Ammerman** is professor of Sociology of Religion in the Department of Sociology of the College of Arts and Sciences and in the School of Theology at Boston University in the US, where she also serves as associate dean of the faculty for the Social Sciences in the College. Her latest research focuses on the social structures and practices of everyday lived religion. Her most recent books include *Sacred Stories*, *Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

**Alp Arat** is a research assistant in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. His research in sociology of religion specialises in secularisation and postsecular theory, with a particular interest in contemporary practices of meditation. He is a former committee member at the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group and he is currently working on the Leverhulme sponsored project titled 'Beyond Personal Wellbeing: Mapping the Social Production of Mindfulness in England and Wales.'

**James A. Beckford** is professor emeritus of sociology at the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick. His research focuses on the theoretical and empirical aspects of religious organisations, new religious movements, church-state problems, civic religion, religion in prisons and religious controversies in several different countries. He is a fellow of the British Academy and has served as president of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, vice-president of the International Sociological Association and president of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion. His publications include *Muslims in Prison: Challenge and Change in Britain and France* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and the edited collection *Theorising Religion: Classical and Contemporary Debates* with John Walliss (Ashgate, 2006).

**Grace Davie** is professor emerita in sociology of religion at the Department of Sociology, Politics, and Anthropology at the University of Exeter. Her

work specialises in the patterns of religion in Europe and the new theoretical paradigms that are emerging in the field. She is a past president of the American Association for the Sociology of Religion and of the Sociology of Religion Research Committee of the International Sociological Association (2002 to 2006). She is the author of *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Blackwell, 1994), *Religion in Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Sociology of Religion* (Sage, 2007).

**Luke Doggett** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Criminology and Sociology at Kingston University. He was a member of the Kingston University Organising Team of the 2105 British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group's 40th anniversary conference. His research covers the role that myth and religion have played in human life, drawing upon philosophical material.

**Anna Fisk** is based at the University of Glasgow's Literature, Theology and the Arts at Glasgow. Her principal research field is feminist studies in religion. She is the author of *Sex, Sin, and Our Selves: Encounters in Feminist Theology and Contemporary Women's Literature* (Wipf and Stock, 2014). Her current research explores craft discourse and contemporary knitting practice in terms of religion and everyday practice, feminist spirituality, material culture and philosophical new materialism.

**Gladys Ganiel** is research fellow in the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests include religion and conflict; the Emerging Church Movement; religion in Ireland; evangelicalism in Northern Ireland; and charismatic Christianity in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Her book, co-authored with Gerardo Marti – *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2014) – was a winner of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion's Distinguished Book Award. She is author of *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Evangelical Journeys*, co-authored with Claire Mitchell, (University College Dublin Press, 2011); *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Palgrave, 2008); and more than thirty articles and chapters. She is president of the European Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Research Network; a member of the Association for the Sociology of Religion's Executive Council, and Chair of its International Liaison Committee.

**Reina Lewis** is Artscom Centenary Professor of Cultural Studies at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. She is author of *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2015); *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (2004); and *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (1996). She is editor of *Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith* (2013); with Zeynep Inankur and Mary Roberts of *The Poetics and*

*Politics of Place: Ottoman Istanbul and British Orientalism* (2010); with Nancy Micklewright of *Gender, Modernity and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women's Writings: A Critical Reader* (2006); with Sara Mills of *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (2003); and with Peter Horne of *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Visual Cultures* (1996). Reina Lewis is also editor with Elizabeth Wilson of the book series 'Dress Cultures'; and with Teresa Heffernan of the book series 'Cultures in Dialogue.'

**Mia Lövhelm** is professor in sociology of religion at the Department of Theology, Uppsala University and member of the Steering Committee of The Impact of Religion – Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy, a centre of excellence at Uppsala University. Her most recent research focuses on representations of religion in the Swedish and Nordic daily press and public service broadcasting. Her work has appeared in the journals *Nordicom Review*; *Information, Communication and Society*; *Feminist Media Studies*; *Culture and Religion*; *Journal of Religion in Europe* and *Nordic Journal of Society and Religion*. She is the editor of *Reconsidering Religion, Law, and Democracy: New Challenges for Society and Research* with Anna-Sara Lind and Ulf Zackariasson (Nordic Academic Press, 2016); *Modernities, Memory and Mutations: Grace Davie and the Study of Religion* with Abby Day (Ashgate, 2015); *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges* (Routledge 2013); and *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives* with Stig Hjarvard (Nordicom, 2012).

**Gordon Lynch** is Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern Theology at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent. His work focuses on the cultural sociology of the sacred, and the relationships between religion, media and contemporary culture. He previously served as co-chair on the Religion, Media and Culture Group within the American Academy of Religion and chair of the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group. His most recent publications include *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Blackwell, 2004); *New Spirituality: An Introduction to Belief Beyond Religion* (I. B. Tauris, 2007); and *The Sacred in the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

**Sarah-Jane Page** is lecturer in sociology at Aston University, and her research interests encompass religious identities, gender, feminism, sexuality, youth, clergy families and parenthood. Her PhD, completed in 2009 and awarded by the University of Nottingham, focused on clergy motherhood in the Church of England as well as male clergy spouses. She secured an Economic and Social Research Council Postdoctoral Research Fellowship to continue this research at Durham University in 2011 to 2012. She was also research fellow on the project 'Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-Faith Exploration.' Her current research focuses on meaning-making around cathedral carol services.

**Amy M. Russell** is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Leeds. Her research examines the practical and theoretical ways inequalities affect the most vulnerable members of society. Her particular focus is on gender and disability inequalities, and she is a member of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Leeds. Her work combines her background and expertise in humanities, social sciences and applied health research.

**Ruth Sheldon** is a research fellow in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research focuses on the ethnographic study of ethical, political and theological encounters within public institutions and urban settings. Her book, *Tragic Encounters and Ordinary Ethics: Palestine-Israel in British Universities* was published in 2016 by Manchester University Press. She is currently working on the research project 'Psychosocial Components of Ethical Monotheism,' which is exploring everyday relations between Jewish, Muslim and Christian neighbours in London.

**Linda Woodhead** is professor of sociology of religion at in the Politics, Philosophy and Religion Department at Lancaster University. Her research focuses on religious change since the 1980s and from 2007 to 2012 she was director of the Arts and Humanities Research Council/Economic and Social Research Council 'Religion and Society Programme' as well as co-founder of the Westminster Faith Debates with former Home Secretary Charles Clarke. Her publications include *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology* (Blackwell, 2000); *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Blackwell, 2005); and *A Sociology of Religious Emotions* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

# Introduction

## Foundations and futures

*Luke Doggett and Alp Arat*

The British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group (Socrel) was first established in 1975 by James A. Beckford, and following its inception, has grown into one of the largest and most successful networks within the wider British Sociological Association. This volume marks the fortieth anniversary of Socrel and brings together an illustrative account of both established and emerging scholars active in the field today.

To be clear from the outset, no such single volume can truly capture the full gamut and vibrancy of current undertakings in the sociology of religion in the UK. As a result, the present collection must necessarily remain selective in its scope and ambition. By focusing on some of the most fruitful and contentious areas of concern that have emerged over the years, however, this volume nevertheless hopes to present a timely and critical illustration of the current state of sociology of religion.

As the editors, we felt it necessary to eschew the heavy hand of a strict editorial straightjacket and instead pursue a more organic approach to selecting the contributors to this volume. This collection is thus organised as follows. Each of the four sections is led by one of the foundational scholars in the field who have been engaged with the Study Group over many years. Each of these established scholars in turn was asked to recommend two more recent and/or emerging voices whose work captures future directions in the field.

## Foundations

The notion that religion is undergoing a process of inevitable decline is what first springs to mind in considering the foundations of the sociological approach to it. This secularisation thesis continues to exert a decisive influence on discussions among sociologists of religion – whether as something to be retained, revised or rejected – and it plays a decisive role in the relationship between the sociology of religion and the wider sociological mainstream. Grace Davie and Linda Woodhead both consider the history of this influence in their chapters. They point to the emphasis placed on

## 2 *Luke Doggett and Alp Arat*

structural features of modernity by ‘hard’ secularisation theorists such as Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce; in particular on rationalisation, urbanisation and pluralisation. Along with Nancy Ammerman, they also point to conceptual developments which have accompanied the growing evidence of the survival and even proliferation of modes of religious practice and experience through the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The uneven global spread of this revitalised religiosity, in which the dwindling congregations of Europe have proved something of an exception, has prompted attention to the effects of particular institutional arrangements. Woodhead refers to the work of David Martin on how different types of political arrangements can be said to affect a population’s religious outcomes. She also refers to the work of rational choice theorists on the extent to which religious suppliers are able to operate freely, thereby leading to a competitive religious market. In both cases, the structures that underlie modernity are seen as less significant than the various institutional configurations which arise on their basis.

An important point made by Davie in her chapter is that by and large, secularisation theories have tended to lament what they perceive as religious decline. The notion that the decline of religion would mean also the decline – or at least the impoverishment – of meaning, morality and community can be traced to the classical sociologies of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel: such sources of ontological security are understood to be nurtured in the womb of religion. However, if religion is indeed so fundamental, the attitudes and experiences at the heart of it must be able to survive the collapse of its institutionalised manifestations, albeit in a diminished, transient or unrecognisable form. This question is addressed in the work of Durkheim in particular. Gordon Lynch takes up this Durkheimian problem in his chapter, pointing to Thomas Luckmann’s concern with how people might orient their lives without the ultimate meanings provided by Christianity in the Western world. Lynch does this by making experiences of the sacred his object of investigation, as do Ruth Sheldon and Amy Russell in their chapters. These authors draw on a number of classic texts concerned with the sacred, such as those of Georges Bataille, Edward Shils, Robert Bellah and Victor Turner, in order to illuminate dimensions of contemporary life that are not religious in the conventional sense, but that exhibit significant religious dimensions. Indeed, this line of thinking brings the very category of religion into question; and the foundations of the way we understand the term in Enlightenment humanism are considered in the chapters of Alp Arat and Anna Fisk.

## **Futures**

While established challenges to the precepts of secularisation theory focus on differing institutional arrangements, as outlined above, many authors in this volume are concerned to identify developments in the way religion is experienced, practised and discussed today that point towards a subtle

reorientation of the debate. In particular, as Davie emphasises, growing religious diversity has accompanied a growing preoccupation with religion in public discussion, leading to potentially significant shifts in how the term is understood. It becomes thematised in both positive and negative senses: on the one hand, it is treated as a constitutional right and linked to ethnicity or nationality as a feature of ‘culture’; and on the other hand, it is associated with extremism and fundamentalism and considered a threat to the liberal order. In his concluding chapter, Beckford reiterates the importance of such public understandings and of the controversies surrounding decision-making in religious regulation. It is precisely these areas that afford us the greatest insight into contemporary developments in the ongoing social construction of religion. Beckford highlights the media’s role in this process of construction, an issue which provides the focus for Mia Lövheim’s chapter; and which is also touched on by Reina Lewis in hers.

Another reorientation which brings the terms of the secularisation debate into question focuses attention on attitudes and experiences which exhibit religious or spiritual features, but which are distinct from institutionalised practices and ideologies. To some extent, the concern to include these varieties of religiosity may reflect a tendency to dissolve religion into a catch-all notion of culture in public discussion, as described above; but it also reflects a more thoroughgoing academic suspicion of the institutional and ideological emphasis which has typically held sway in understandings of religion in the post-Reformation era. Ammerman in her chapter stresses the effect of a growing recognition of religious diversity within and beyond the Western world in decentring this kind of account. Without wishing to undermine the abiding importance of religious institutions and ideologies, she sees a growing acknowledgement of embodied, emotional attitudes as paving the way for an appreciation of modes of religiosity that previously escaped the radar. These attitudes are embedded in everyday life as much as they are in institutionalised forms of religiosity. Another element in the shift of attention beyond religious institutions and ideologies is the theme of individualisation and agency. Gladys Ganiel refers to members of the de-institutionalised Christian communities she covers in her chapter as “active curators of their own spiritual quests, constructing selves and communities that are preserving the vitality of religion.” As well as reflecting a historically contingent understanding, then, an over-emphasis on religious institutions and ideologies overlooks the proliferation of individualised religious forms in the contemporary world. In correcting this unduly restrictive perspective with a broader appreciation of religious experience, practice and belonging, one also challenges secularisation theory. This constellation of concerns figures strongly in the approaches taken by Fisk and Sarah-Jane Page in their chapters, as well as in the approaches of Ammerman and Ganiel in theirs. They all make use of the term ‘lived religion’ to refer to an appropriately enlarged conception of religiosity, as well as drawing on similar terms such as ‘everyday religion’ and ‘implicit religion.’



In the context of a rise in individualised modes of religiosity and spirituality, their detachment from the control of religious institutions, and indeed a tendency to conflate religiosity with ‘culture’ or ‘ethnicity’ in public discussion, religion becomes increasingly marketable as a lifestyle choice. This is not exactly the religious market discussed by rational choice theorists: the product is not simply religion, but a brand aesthetic linked to a more generalised life orientation; and the key players are commercial rather than religious organisations. Referring to the work of Shelima Janmohamed, Lewis points to ‘generation M’: “Muslim millennials who are comfortable with mainstream consumer culture and expect to express their religious and religio-ethnic identity in all their lifestyle choices.” Unlike their parents, they do not see engagement with consumer culture as inconsistent with religious conviction. In his concluding chapter, Beckford stresses the importance of this line of enquiry into emerging compatibilities between lifestyle choice and religion.

A final theme to address in introducing the ‘futures’ strand of this collection is the debated meaning of the term ‘religion.’ The question of the social or socio-political construction of the category figures at several points above, demonstrating its pervasive significance in the attempt to make sense of findings on the ground. Three possible theoretical strategies emerge in this volume in the light of this, from authors who acknowledge insights into the constructed nature of the ‘religion’ category and address this directly. Responding to the secular humanist assumptions he identifies in modern understandings of religion, Arat makes the case for preserving a notion of an underlying religious essence, albeit one which is appropriately tempered by empirically grounded critical insights. Warning against overestimation of the ability of discursive signifiers to entirely obliterate the reality to which they refer, he advocates rigorous empirical work as the basis for progress in developing concepts. This empirical rigour also distinguishes the sociology of religion from religious studies. Lynch takes the contested condition of the ‘religion’ category as a basis for seeking firmer ground by focusing on *the sacred* as a basis for understanding patterns of experience, feeling and practice associated with religion. On this approach, he demonstrates that the same patterns may in fact also be observed beyond the confines of what is conventionally understood as religion. In his chapter, he points to nationalism, humanitarianism and childhood as examples of how emotionally charged convictions revolve around a sacred core. Meanwhile, Beckford’s approach – set out in his concluding chapter – is to reject any attempt to arrive at a purified notion of religion. Rather, instead of taking religion as his object of investigation, his object is quite simply the ongoing social construction of religion. He advocates the same approach in relation to other, cognate categories.

### **Marking the territory**

Davie’s chapter seeks to spell out the distinctiveness of the sociology of religion *vis-à-vis* its cognate disciplines and begins by setting out both the

continuities and changes in the religious life of Britain over the last twenty years. By tracing the theoretical corpus of the twentieth century from 'hard' secularisation theories to more recent emphases on individualisation and rational choice theory, Davie shows how despite positive conceptions of religion as a source of cohesion, secular Enlightenment philosophies to date have consistently tended to view religion as being reducible to other social categories, most notably nationality and ethnicity. In turn, Davie highlights the ways in which the recent theoretical corpus has gradually shifted from postmodern to postsecular considerations, resulting in the paradoxical *status quo* whereby secularisation now claims to embrace diversity but expresses discomfort with the resulting increase in the prominence of religion in the public sphere. The chapter concludes by paying attention to the role of Socrel in helping us understand these issues in more detail and forge new ties between the sociology of religion and the mainstreams of social science as a whole.

Arat in turn argues that the true responsibility for the continued challenges faced in closer engagements between the sociology of religion and the discipline as a whole lies less with the secularity of the social sciences as such, than the sub-discipline's failure to do full justice to its own area of study. In differentiating between empirical and theoretical readings of the postsecular turn, this chapter illustrates how the postsecular moniker is as much concerned with shifts taking place within the dynamics and social spaces of religion in contemporary society, as it is with the core practice of doing sociology on the ground. Following the historic trajectory from 'hard' to 'soft' iterations of secularisation, Arat thus argues that current sensibilities in sociological dealings with religion are gradually shifting further from soft-secularism towards soft-essentialism. By bracketing the category of religion not out but firmly into its research design, postsecular sociologies of religion are thus identifiable as promising new alternatives to secular sociologies based on standard modes of methodological agnosticism *vis-à-vis* religion. Arat thus claims that the recent postsecular turn is best identified as a reaction away from populist sociologies of religion towards more monastic forms of sociology that dare to focus on the subject of religion for its own remit alone.

In concluding the opening section aimed at 'marking the territory,' Lövheim's chapter focuses more specifically on the new forms of media that have now become pivotal in the growing visibility of religion in contemporary society. Lövheim shows that while sociologists of religion are becoming more sensitive to such developments, they continue to lack the conceptual tools to adequately assess the ways in which media shapes and influences our understandings of religion in the world today. This chapter thus offers an examination of the emerging potential for closer dialogue between the sociology of religion and the sociology of media. More specifically, in distinguishing between processes of 'mediation' and 'mediatisation,' Lövheim highlights the necessity of separating between the role of the media in

religious affairs on the one hand, and more fundamental inventories of symbols, values and discourses through which religion becomes re-constituted in society more generally. The chapter concludes by setting out that just as media scholars are required to develop greater knowledge and understanding of religion and its place in modern society, scholars of religion too are now called upon in turn to develop their own media literacy.

### **Institutions and agency**

Woodhead's main concern in her chapter is to illustrate how the structural focus of secularisation theories needs to be supplemented by a recognition of the role of agency and the decision-making of specific organisations in order to adequately understand the fortunes of religion. While key social structures such as rationalisation and pluralisation certainly help us to appreciate the tectonics underlying a given religious situation, they are not sufficient in themselves to predict or explain the outcomes. Woodhead illustrates this point through an account of the decline of the Anglican Church: although its fate is certainly understandable in terms of developments at the level of social structure such as individualisation – and indeed this level of explanation is indispensable – the failure of the Church to respond to these developments appropriately is understandable in terms of the decisions of specific individuals and groups. This point may be underlined through comparison with the Church of Denmark which demonstrates that there was nothing inevitable about the decline of the Anglican Church.

Ganiel also draws upon the theme of individualisation in her chapter, considering two fringe Christian movements in Ireland: the Belfast-based Ikon collective; and Slí Éile: a Jesuit group based in the Republic of Ireland. Although both of these movements were fairly short-lived, they serve as examples of how people's increasingly reflexive approach to religiosity often manifests itself. Such individualised forms tend to define themselves in relation to religious institutions, typically as critical alternatives or attempts to change them; and sometimes even aspire to a reformed institutional model. For this reason, Ganiel advocates the importance of the terms 'de-institutionalised religion' and 'extra-institutional religion' as means of capturing the effects of religious individualisation. The separation of such fringe groupings from the rebuffed parent institution is not absolute; and members seek to foster an innovative religious community which can stand in some tension with the emphasis they place on agency and an individual spiritual quest.

In considering findings from the 'Religion, Youth and Sexuality' project – on which she was a co-investigator – Page draws attention to the agency exercised by young people in reconciling religious and sexual identities. She brings to light how embodied religious and sexual attitudes and the inequalities they entail are actively negotiated at the untidy level of everyday interactions. Moreover, this concern with embodied attitudes enables Page to

focus on the way in which the religiosity people negotiate comes interwoven with everyday life; and interwoven with dimensions of identity such as gender and age as well as sexuality. She notes the extent to which participants in the project problematised conventional permutations of both religiosity and sexuality in articulating their identity. As well as reinforcing the theme of individualisation, Page's findings provide an insight into everyday resistance to powerful discourses underlying identity-formation. In keeping with Ganiel's findings, however, such resistant, individualised religious identities remain tied to more established ones.

## Embodied and material religion

The enlarged understanding of religion employed by Page – emphasising embodied attitudes which penetrate everyday life as much as they penetrate formal religiosity – provides the focus for Ammerman's chapter. Treating this approach as something of a paradigmatic shift in the sociology of religion, Ammerman traces the seeds for its emergence to worldwide religious resurgences in the second half of the twentieth century, from the rise of conservative religion in the US to the examples of Iran and Latin America. While these phenomena certainly furnished potent challenges to secularisation models at the time, it is only more recently that their potential to challenge prevailing understandings of religion has been recognised. In diverting attention away from disembodied beliefs and ideologies, a revised approach to religion accords significance to the physical world as a whole: bodies as well as other physical objects and spaces. Moreover, an appreciation of the extent to which religion permeates everyday life entails an appreciation of its potential to enrich our understanding of diverse dimensions of society, such as race and ethnicity, gender, migration, age, health and illness; and indeed sexuality, as Page demonstrates above.

Ammerman's interest in the body, materiality and everyday life is echoed in Lewis's chapter, which is focused on the relationship between fashion and Muslim women's identities. Lewis documents the growth of the niche modest fashion market from around 2005, bringing to light its growing significance for Muslim women as a means of expressing meanings which allow them to navigate complex social pressures. Modest fashion enables young Muslim women to defiantly express Islamic identity in the face of Islamophobia at the same time as expressing a liberal, cosmopolitan outlook in the face of Muslim conservatism. It was noted above that the readiness of Muslim millennials to embrace consumption as a source of identity distinguishes them from previous generations. While this development raises concerns about a possible commodification of religion in the future, Lewis notes its importance in improving the public perception of Muslims. As things stand, both suppliers and consumers are actively engaged in shaping the modest fashion market through transnational online communities led by designers and bloggers.

The themes of embodied religiosity, materiality and everyday life are also employed by Fisk, but this time in relation to practices that are unconnected with recognised religious institutions. Focusing on knitting communities, she demonstrates how notions of lived religion and implicit spirituality can allow us to make sense of craft communities more generally. She draws on Lynch's work on religious dimensions of social life in documenting experiences of sanctity and the ritualisation of crafting relationships and practices. She also points to the emphasis knitters place on the therapeutic nature of repetitive self-expression and the feeling of belonging associated with this. Noting the continuities between this type of emphasis and the well-publicised attractions of popular spirituality more generally, Fisk links the revived interest in craft practices with the individualisation of religiosity more generally. In the light of the exodus of women from the Anglican Church in the UK documented by Woodhead, Fisk reflects that craft practices such as knitting provide individualised women with an alternative destination.

### **Religious dimensions of social life**

Whilst much attention has been paid to modern debates around the secularisation and de-secularisation of religion, Lynch argues that another important strand of work that is arguably far less developed concerns the religious dimensions of social life that extend beyond religion conceived in conventional, traditional and substantive forms. In an effort to engage with these overlooked dimensions more fully, Lynch's chapter traces significant lines of analysis into the social formation of emotionally charged moral meanings, including the ways in which these operate around symbolic representations of the sacred and profane, and become further mediated through ritual practices. Using nationalism, humanitarianism and childhood as illustrative case studies, Lynch shows how sociologists of religion can benefit from engaging more closely with scholarship in both the 'strong programme' of cultural sociology and the anthropology of ethics. This chapter thus illustrates how cross-fertilisations of this nature are able to provide rich accounts of how deeply charged meanings of the sacred and profane shape and influence wider contexts of social life, and in turn offer fuller and more substantiated understandings of religions themselves.

Russell's chapter utilises the concept of the sacred to gain a better understanding of the boundary formations at play throughout societal and embodied responses to human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Focusing in particular on the process of writing work visa applications among women who have been trafficked from post-Soviet countries into Israel, Russell shows how applications of the sacred as a non-religious spatial category can cast fresh light on current debates around stigma, shame, social exclusion and sexual violence. This chapter focuses on the following three key areas of analysis: the interrogation of the trafficked figure and her role in political and territorial stability; an examination of women's embodied experiences

of sexual violence; and finally, an exploration of societies' responses to women who have been trafficked and forced to sell sex. In focusing on body boundaries as constant sites of tension where the sacred categories of gender and impermeability are experienced as part of a sense of self, this chapter presents an alternative conceptual framework for engaging with theories of the sacred. Russell's account thus sheds a fresh analytic light onto a series of societal responses to such trafficked women from governments, media, friends, family and in particular themselves.

Finally, Sheldon draws on an ethnographic study of student engagement with Palestine-Israel debates to explore the moral and ethical formations of polarised conflict within public life. For over four decades, events in Palestine-Israel have provoked raging conflicts within British universities, giving rise to widely reported controversies around free speech, 'extremism,' antisemitism and Islamophobia. Sheldon's chapter begins by drawing on notions of the sacred and social performance in order to theorise the processes through which pro-Palestine and pro-Israel student groups appear to cohere around conflicting moral truths. Focusing on a high-profile public event staged within a British university, Sheldon traces the reproduction of symbolic identity and difference; explores the sources of the institutional desire to perform moral rationalism; and argues that this represses and aggravates the traumatic histories at stake. Aside from these more visible spectacles, this chapter further highlights the ways in which publicly adversarial students engage in more harmonious conversations outside of their typical conflictual encounters. Sheldon thus highlights the enabling conditions for such ethical communicative practices and considers how theories of the sacred might occlude such forms of relationality. The chapter thus presents further evidence of how such engagements with the sacred can help sociologists to go beyond the immediate confines of religions by exploring the workings of ambiguity, ambivalence and creativity in democratic life as a whole.



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