

GULBENKIAN IDEAS

# Let's talk about the Future of Religion

Olivier Roy

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To look at the future we have to revert to the past and to see whether we can project recent trends into the future: the trends we are witnessing today will shape the future of religions. Speaking of religion, we cannot just consider the spiritual feelings that any human being is supposed to experience at least occasionally because it is too vague and does not say anything about which forms this feeling will take. We use the term religion to qualify a faith community that is defined as such in a secular environment: conversely, when everything is religious there is no religion. However, while Christianity has quite clearly set up a religious space distinct from the secular space, that is not the case for many other religions: in order to avoid a too christ-centered approach, we will simply define religion as being what the law, court practices and tradition define it as.

In the contemporary period, it is impossible to dissociate religion from secularism, because it is the secularisation process that has set the room for religion as an autonomous system of beliefs and practices. In order to put an end to the religious wars, the treaties of Westphalia (1648) decided to give the control of religion to the State. In this sense all States are secular because it is the State that decides on what religion is and not the reverse. This modern Westphalian state, the nation-state, is now the prototype of any state in the contemporary world: even the liberation movements that fought against the western colonial powers took from them the model of the nation-state. For this reason the relationship between state and religion is central to understand the future of religion itself. If globalization is undermining the nation-state, what consequences will this have for religion?

The state contributes to shaping religion from outside. Social sciences, which were developed at the end of the 19th century in the framework of an academic system that was closely associated with the modern nation-state, helped legitimate the control of the state over religion.

In short, the dominant view in social sciences, since their inception at the end of the 19th century, was that modernisation implies the construction of a modern rational and effective State and hence a continuous process of secularisation. For Max Weber as well as Durkheim, religions played an important role in History by grounding the social bond in a transcendental truth, and by bringing human beings together in a same system of beliefs and rituals that would give a supra-natural foundation for

a legal system. From this perspective, religion is more than an individual quest for meaning and spirituality, it is defined as a coherent collective world view, a theology or at least a mythology, and a set of normative moral and legal constraints. For the founders of sociology, even if the quest for spirituality is engrained in the human mind, the need to establish the social bond under the auspices of a transcendental horizon could find a fulfilment in systems of thoughts and practices other than religions, namely nationalism and devotion to the State. The rise of the modern rational nation-state did fulfil the need for social cohesion, normativity and voluntary acquiescence to law and to the state, in a more efficient way than religion used to do. Secularisation, in this perspective, is a pre-requisite for progress through rationality and efficiency. Religions have achieved their historical mission: to prepare the ground for the modern nation-state.

This led to the famous “modernisation theory”: there is a need for a prior secularisation in order to achieve modernisation. Religions are then seen as spent forces, which either should modernize themselves, by becoming more liberal and to a certain degree more “secular”, or would disappear through a lack of followers. The council of Vatican II (1963) seemed to endorse this predicament: secularize or die. It was called an “*aggiornamento*”, an adaptation to the present days. This process was not specific to Christian Europe. In the Middle East, Turkey, Iran and India, post-colonial secularist governments tried to restrain the role of religion, while the new state of Israel was led by a secular elite. In China and the Soviet Union communist regimes were cracking down on religion. At the end of the sixties, the future for religions seemed bleak.

However, many events in the 1970’s brought a challenge to the modernisation theory. The Islamic revolution of Iran and the rise of the “Christian right” in the USA, later followed by the fall of communism, seemed to bely the secularisation theory. The debate was no longer on secularization but on the meaning of the so called “return of religion”: is it “back to the Middle Ages” or “forward toward a more religious and spiritual world”?

But was the “return of religion” a real (re)turning point? If we look at empirical data, in the Western world at least, there has been a clear decline in religious practices, since the mid-20th century until now: the so-called return of religion did not correspond to a rise in practices and vocations. The timing is of course quite different according to the various countries. In France the decline has a long history, and already in the 1940’s the Catholic Church had to acknowledge that the country is largely de-Christianised; in Ireland, on the other hand, the Church had been able to impose its norms and values until the end of the 20th century, when suddenly this influence almost totally collapsed (a referendum on abortion banned it with more than 60% of the votes in 1963, and allowed it with the same percentage in 2018). The last case of decline in religious practices is Poland, where despite (or because of) the electoral victory of the Christian populist party FiS, the mass-attendance and enrolment in catholic seminaries significantly dropped after 2018.

But secularisation is not the whole story. Secularisation was not necessarily anti-religious, from the 19th to mid-20th century, it did promote in Europe a secularisation of religious values but not a change in the content of these values (rejection of sexual freedom, abortion, marriage, role of men and women, criminalisation of homosexuality). Nevertheless, since the sixties, secularisation turned into a moral and cultural dechristianization: secular values are no longer secularized religious values, but totally different values that undermine the very fundamentals of religions (sexual freedom, same sex marriages, gender fluidity etc.).

One could object that this dechristianisation is a purely western or even European phenomenon but there are signs that it happens elsewhere for other religions, and particularly in the Middle East where the so-called Islamic revival did happen. In Iran, decades of Islamic regime led to one of the most secular societies in the whole Middle East. In Maghreb, and to a lesser extent the Gulf states, there are clear signs of a decline in religious attitudes. In Turkey, the last elections showed a rising support for secular parties in big cities. More tolerance, less public practices, more outspoken secularist campaigns (in Morocco the “*dé-jeuneurs*” who pledge to ignore the fast in public): young people show far less interest in religion than the previous generations; polls show that more people do not practice, or that some even claim to be atheist. Street demonstrations since the start of the so-called Arab spring have conspicuously shunned religious chants and slogans; everywhere, when elections took place, the religious political parties lost.

How to reconcile the two phenomena: a growing secularisation and a “return of religion”. It is not a return. Religion is more visible precisely because it is disconnected from the dominant secular culture. It is more visible because it is turning into a conspicuous minority.

This more visible religion established itself as autonomous, independent and critical of the dominant culture: in a word it outsources itself.

We can see a dual deculturation: religious people consider that they are now a minority in a dominant secular, profane and even pagan culture (including in supposedly-religious societies, like the Middle East). On the other hand, secular people are losing the religious culture of their forefathers who knew about religion with or without faith: the contemporary secular people simply ignore the basic tenets of religions or the influence these religions had in shaping their present culture. For them religion is no longer familiar: it is either weird or fanatical. This trend is *mutatis mutandis* to be found in other religions: Muslim Salafists do believe that the so-called Muslim societies are only Muslim by name; many Haredim Jews in Israel believe that they live as a minority in a non-religious State, whatever the claim made by the same State to be a Jewish one.

This return of religion, because of its high visibility and impact on politics, has been perceived by the States and regimes as either a threat or an opportunity. A threat for secular states of course, but also for conservative regimes who fear that religion might provide some legitimacy to their political opponents. Consequently, in both cases the



States endeavoured to gain more control over religion, either by limiting the influence of religion in the public sphere (France, China), or by turning it into a state administration (Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, India), a move that always ran against the independent religious institutions or churches (the Catholic Church, the University of Al Azhar in Cairo). Moreover, this extension of State control is happening at a time of crisis for the various religious establishments and institutions (paedophilia crisis for the Catholic Church). Elsewhere, involvement of clerics in politics (Iran, “Bible belt” in the USA) drove many believers to distance themselves from their faith communities. When clergies come under the control of the State (directly in most Middle East country and indirectly in Russia, or, paradoxically as far as Islam is concerned, in secular France -where the Ministry of the Interior is actively involved in building a “French Islam”), they usually lose their appeal and stop to meet the spiritual needs of their flocks. Consequently, the meddling of religion and politics in whatever form contributes to “desacralizing” and hence secularizing religion.

Another dimension of politicisation of religion is the “hijacking” of it by populist movements under the label of “identity”: to “make America great again”, one should promote Christianity, Europe should reject migrants (and specifically Muslim migrants) because “Europe is Christian”, Hungarian and Polish governments stress the Christian identity of their countries, while the Prime minister of India, Modi, is trying to transform the country from a secular to a Hindu State.

Nevertheless, paradoxically the use of religion by populist movements is not providing a new push towards religious practices, on the contrary. Moreover, it splits the faith communities between “identitarians”, who claim that one can be Christian without faith, which is now optional, and “universalists”, who consider that the religious call should rise above frozen national identities. The populist use of religion in fact is a new tool of secularization because it deprives religions of what actually makes them what they are (faith, afterlife, virtue) in favour of a very mundane identity.

To conclude: the so called “return of religion” does not predict a new, glorious dawn for religion, - on the contrary. So what is the future for religions?

We have to look first at how the believers themselves see the future of religion.

Far from euphoria, we can witness a dark mood among many born again believers who have a very pessimistic vision of the future. This is exemplified by a popular book “*The Benedict Option*” by Rob Dreher, who states that believers (in this case Christian) are aware that they are definitely living in a pagan world and advocate that they have to withdraw into some sort of self-made ghettos, comparable to the Benedictine monasteries of the early Middle Ages, waiting for a new revival that could happen only at God’s decision. Other believers expect nothing more than Doomsday: a return of Christ after an Apocalypse. A very popular movie among American evangelicals (*Left Behind*) shows how “*The time is near when all things will end*” (Peter 1).

This feeling of the end of the times is to be found among Muslim Salafists and radical jihadists, who follow the dire predication of Said Qotb: the real believers are now just a small suffering minority that expects (and might contribute to trigger) the Apocalypse. In this sense there is no future for religion, at least on this Earth.

This pessimistic view is countered by the supporters of a “missionary” approach. They do accept the idea that believers are in a minority, but they take that as a good opportunity to “reset” religion in a less political, less institutional mood and to return to the pristine mission of preaching to the pagans, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. The best representative of this trend is Pope Francis himself. Pope Francis acknowledges the decline of the influence of religion, but presents it as an opportunity for believers to re-assess their claim to be the salt of the earth. The future of religion here is “back to the basics”, not normative, but spiritual.

Both trends are reaching a new audience: the losers and nihilists for the first one, the people in quest of spirituality for the other. Both trends are shaping the future of religion.

For the future, we can foresee the perpetuation of the crisis and the weakening of institutional religions, of “churches”. State sponsored religions will have no future, precisely because they turn religion into something else. The populist use of religion will contribute to the crisis of institutional religions and to the secularisation of the references to it. The confusion between identity and religion is stuck in a defensive approach: the defence of nation-states and borders, flags and fences. No future that a religion hijacked by populists, be it in Europe or in India.

The “missionary” movement has a window of opportunity because it is at ease with globalisation: it addresses individuals in search of a community and not communities in search of soul, but there are some challenges here.

First there is the risk for religion to be diluted into a loose individual spirituality attached to a set of various practices more oriented to individual well-being and earthly happiness. That is the yoga option. As we have already mentioned, the opposite, but in fact symmetric, is the Doomsday approach embodied by the confrontation with climate change: it is no more a utopian perspective, like the quest of paradise either on earth (revolution) or in the afterlife (paradise), it is an apocalyptic perspective because things can only get worse. Anti-species and deep-ecology narratives are also based on a Doomsday perspective: the disappearance of the Human species is perceived for both as a positive step, which is some sort of a suicidal perspective.

There is a paradoxical close connection between the fear for Doomsday and the quest for individual well-being: both imply the disappearance of a collective long-term positive perspective of salvation. It is either individual short-term earthly salvation or long-term collective destruction.

The “missionary” movement tries to instil a more optimistic view: there could be a real “return” to faith. But the challenge here is the issue of values. The young generations are now defending a modern set of values (in fact the logical consequence of the “cultural revolution” of the sixties) that present sexual freedom as an anthropological change: not only LGBT rights and the disconnect between sexuality and procreation but a reconfiguration of gender, procreation and sexuality, rejecting the normative anthropology of most religions (men and women are created as they are).

This disconnect between a traditional religious normative system (based on a vision of some sort of natural law, either created by God or expressing the essence of human being) and the new values of absolute freedom to reshape anything that could be seen as natural (sex, parenthood) is probably the biggest challenge for religion today.

There is clearly a trend for some believers to give a religious legitimacy to these anthropological changes, in a way comparable to the “baptism” of Marxism through the “theology of liberation” in the sixties. The challenge here is the same as the association between populism and religion: are these endeavours to “modernise” religion nothing other than a new way to secularize it? Conversely, to resist the endorsement of the new values of the time might make religion obsolete in favour of the loose individual “feel good” forms of spirituality. The real challenge here for religion, if it wants to remain the salt of the earth, is to stay aloof from the loose forms of spirituality that are the spice of everyday life.

The issue faced by religion is not just the future, it is simply the permanent confrontation with the present. The endeavour to “historize” religion is part of the process of secularizing it.



Olivier Roy (1949) is presently Professor at the European University Institute (Florence): he is the scientific adviser of the Middle East Directions programme at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and former head of the ReligioWest research project (funded by the European Research Council). He has been a Senior Researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research (since 1985), Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (since 2003), and visiting professor at Berkeley University (2008/2009). He was in charge of the OSCE's Mission for Tajikistan (1993-94) and was a Consultant for the UN Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan (1988). His field works include Afghanistan, Political Islam, Middle East, Islam in the West and comparative religions. Mr. Roy received an "Agrégation de Philosophie" and a Ph.D. in Political Sciences. He is the author of "The failure of political Islam" (Harvard UP 1994), "Globalized Islam" (Columbia University Press, 2004), and more recently "Holy Ignorance" (Hurst/ Oxford UP, 2010) "Jihad and Death", (Hurst/OUP, 2017), "In search of the Lost Orient", (Columbia UP, 2017) and "Is Europe Christian?" (Hurst, OUP 2019).



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