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# OBITUARIES AND PREDICTIONS: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE OF RELIGION<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Religion is a social phenomenon. Society and, therefore, religion will continue to exist as long as human beings exist. This article explores this syllogism, by analysing two 19<sup>th</sup>-century social theories on the future of religion. Weber was not positive as to the future of religion and foresaw that religion would die out at the hands of rationality and modernisation. Durkheim predicted that religion would suffer at the hands of rationality and modernisation, but that it would not die out completely. It would disappear from the public domain and become a private matter. As private matter, religion might even grow, according to Durkheim. These theories became the framework for all theories on religion and secularisation. Berger, Luckmann and others followed along these lines. A new appraisal of where we currently stand with the effects of secularisation on religion is necessary. At present, religion is perceived as being vibrant and active. There are reasons why religion did not disappear or become invisible as was predicted. The article investigates certain key characteristics of current society in order to determine the nature of religion in the future. It examines the role of pluralism, individualism and the effect of uncertainty. The result as to the future of religion is a dichotomy of continuity and discontinuity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The question at hand is: What will become of religion? The past cannot be changed. The future is uncertain. There were many occasions in the past when religion was relinquished and appeared in the obituaries. There were just as many occasions in the past when a different, more glorious future was predicted for religion. Are we then currently at the beginning or at the end of religion?

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1 This is an extension of a paper delivered on the EASR Annual Conference, IAHR Special Conference, Södertörn University, Stockholm, in August 23-26 2012.

The basic argument of this article can be expressed by way of the syllogism: Religion is a social phenomenon. Society and, therefore, religion will exist as long as human beings exist.

This syllogism demonstrates something of both the past and the future of religion. Religion came into being when *homo sapiens* came into being. The very nature of *homo sapiens* is to be a group animal. The sociological approach to studying the future of religion led scholars to different conclusions. On the one hand, Durkheim proclaimed that religion would continue to exist due to its very social nature. On the other, Weber professed that religion would come to an end due to its social nature. This article will give both Durkheim's and Weber's perspective in order to make some predictions about the future of religion. As far as Weber is concerned, the obituary pronouncing publicly the end of religion is overdue. Since Durkheim and Weber, many others have discussed the future of religion (cf. Wilson 2003; Demerath 2003; Bruce 2003; Gill 2003; Dobbelaere 2011). These discussions attempted to state the expected future of religion, by investigating secularisation. This current study makes use of a sociological perspective without focusing on secularisation in order to determine the future of religion.

As this article is not concerned with studying the very nature of religion, it is not necessary to define religion. This article selects a sociological perspective on religion. Of course, there are many more perspectives to choose from and it is never purported that sociology is the only way of investigating religion. This is by no means a reductionist approach to studying religion.

When discussing the beginning and end of religion, it is necessary to differentiate between the origin and the beginning of religion. Origin would refer to the source for religion which, in this instance, might either be objective (accepting that the transcendental exists autonomously and reveals itself objectively to man) or subjective (accepting that the notion of the transcendental stems from a psychological or sociological interpretation of reality). The beginning of religion indicates a more temporal approach to finding the starting point of religion. This article is not concerned with either the origin or the beginning of religion. Nor is it concerned with the question as to how man with cognitive ability will cope with or without religion in society in future. As the focus will be on the future of religion, the article is rather concerned with the social conditions under which religion will continue to exist and what form religion might take under particular conditions.

In order to remain as neutral as possible in this discussion, the term "transcendental" will be used when referring to the focal point of religious

attention. The term “transcendental” is used comprehensively in order to accommodate all possible foci of religious veneration. To avoid confusion, the term “the sacred”, which Durkheim uses to describe the same concept, is not used, unless it refers to Durkheim’s usage.

When discussing sociology, we are, in fact, discussing the very nature of man. There are indeed many elements which we can utilise to identify the essence of man. This article will focus on two main characteristics of man, namely man as social being and man as rational being. This is in no way an attempt to reduce the understanding of human nature, but merely to restrict our understanding to specific elements and their implications.

The article can be divided into two main sections. The first section deals with the announcement of the end of religion (Obituaries) and the second deals with positive outcomes for the future of religion (Predictions). These two sections should not be perceived as following chronologically on one another. They reflect two different positions on the future of religion and should be regarded as parallel to one another.

## 2. OBITUARIES FOR RELIGION

### 2.1 Weber’s perspective

In a sociological discussion of religion, Weber (1966:xxi) focuses not on religion, but rather on the effect of religion on man’s social interaction and economic action. Weber is not interested in the essence of what constitutes religion, but rather in the type of social behaviour religion constitutes (Weber 1966:1). Weber is focused on determining the meaning of religious behaviour, as exhibited by subjective experiences, ideas and purposes of the individuals concerned (Kippenberg 2011:72). For Weber, religious actions are casuistic (Weber 1966:1): religious actions are performed in order to achieve a specific end, which Weber believes is predominantly an economic concern.

For Weber (1966:xxvii), it is clear that there is no society that does not possess something that can be called religion. All societies have religion. For Weber (1966:5), religion consists of a concept of supernatural order, spirits, gods or impersonal powers which are superior to forces that determine natural events. According to Weber (1966:xxviii), these spirits, gods or impersonal powers provide meaning to those events that cannot be explained rationally. The consequence would be that, if rational explanations are provided, the spirits, gods or impersonal powers will not be needed to provide meaning.

Man's relationship with the supernatural is functional. Weber (1966:xxviii, 11) indicates how "primitive man" seeks the assistance of the supernatural for earthly concerns (i.e., health, long life, assistance in war, and so on). According to Weber (1966:11), the ancient Roman religion (derived either from the Latin *relegere* or *religare*) remained *religio*, which signifies a close bond between man and "cultic formulae and a concern for the spirits (*numina*)". The principle in Roman *religio* was that all actions in daily life have some religious significance (Weber 1966:11). Compared to what some currently consider to be religion, the definition of the word "religion" should be reconsidered.<sup>2</sup>

This functional understanding of religion lies at the base of Weber's prediction of the demise of religion. If religion's function is to assist man in earthly concerns and if it provides the meaning to everything without rational explanation, it is clear that religion can only continue to exist under conditions of low or no rationalism, where the meaning of strange events can only be sought in religion. As soon as man does not need supernatural assistance to survive and if man can explain all phenomena rationally, religion will cease to play an integral role in that society, leaving a void. This theory needs some elucidation.

For Weber (1966:126), religion has different functions for different social classes.<sup>3</sup> Weber (1966:125-126) differentiates broadly between the intellectuals and the laity of the society of his time. For Weber (1966:119), the intellectuals have throughout the history of all major world religions played a decisive role in the development of religion. This is echoed by Berger (1999:10) who identifies an "international subculture" consisting of "Western-type higher education", a "globalized elite culture", which influences society. These intellectuals, according to Berger, are more prone to secularisation. Berger (1999:11) suspects that in society religious upsurges are motivated not only by religious motives, but also by a populist protest and resistance against secular elite. Due to the influential role intellectuals have played in the past, Berger (1999:13) suggests that a religious upsurge (especially in the USA) in the future might occur among the "disenchanted post-modernist academics".

Both intellectuals and laity have different expectations of religion. For the intellectual strata of society, religion assists man to discover the

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2 As indicated before this paper is not concerned with redefining religion. It might be of interest to investigate what constituted religion in Roman times and what religion comprises of currently.

3 Whether the same structural differentiation exists today in all societies is questionable. The principle however that different levels of society have different expectations of religion still applies.

ultimate meaning of human existence, and thus to find unity with oneself, one's fellow man and the cosmos (Weber 1966:125). The lower intellectual (laity) levels of society seek a moral and ethical compass in religion (Weber 1966:126). According to Weber (1966:101), salvation religion probably has its origin among socially privileged groups. For intellectuals, religion provides salvation insofar as it caters to the inner need (Weber 1966:124). Such salvation is theoretical and systematic and not the kind of salvation from external conditions of despair which characterises the religion of the lower classes of society (Weber 1966:215). This theoretical and systematic approach to salvation of the intellectuals causes what Weber (1966:125) calls the "flight from the world", characterising the religion of the intellectuals.

To the contrary, Weber (1966:80) indicates how the "peasants" exist in close connection with nature and are dependent on organic processes and natural events. The peasantry is further characterised by Weber (1966:80) as not focusing on economic activities or rational systematisation processes, causing peasants only to persist in religion under external (political or financial) dread or fear. In the past, peasants were regarded as of lower intellectual ability and, therefore, not as a formative power in the development of religion. Weber (1966:84) indicates how, in the past, the peasantry started religious protests against intellectualism seated in the cities, the place of the church and ruling (educated) classes. These examples of religious protests by peasants were, in fact, a reaction against rationalism, identified with the cities of the time (Weber 1966:84). Bureaucratic powers in cities tended to use religion to control the masses of uneducated people (peasants) (Weber 1966:89). The rationalistic approach by intellectual leaders of ancient societies was opposed to the irrational and emotional approach identified with the peasant religion (Weber 1966:90). The pure mundane concern of existence of the lower levels of society caused them to exhibit an ethical religion (Weber 1966:91).

Weber's differentiation of classes in society is not as simplistic as to divide society in two opposing categories: intellectuals and peasants. The differentiation is much more complex. Within the lower middle class, in particular, Weber (1966:95) identifies a wide variety and even contrasting experiences of religion. The lower middle classes, according to Weber (1966:96), tend towards congregational religion, salvation religion and rational, ethical religion. This tendency within the lower middle class is economically motivated. Middle-class existence is not as closely connected to nature as peasantry is (Weber 1966:97). This religious tendency among the lower middle classes is opposed to the tendency of the peasantry (Weber 1966:96). Being more connected to nature, peasantry requires

a religion containing magic in order to influence the irrational powers of nature (Weber 1966:97).

Lower middle-class existence is based on economic activity. Economic activity requires rational abilities from the middle class in terms of calculations and innovation. It is also clear for Weber (1966:97) that the lower middle class exists in a world with a utilitarian expectation: hard work will result in products to sell, selling requires exchange and compensation. This leads Weber (1966:97) to conclude that the lower middle classes live by a rational world view with an ethical understanding of labour.

As to the slave or proletariat level of society, Weber (1966:99) states that this level of society has never produced any type of religion. For this level, rational conceptions are unimportant. They are the most susceptible to missionary activities (Weber 1966:101).

In conclusion, it is clear from Weber's theory that different social classes have different functions for religion. For the economically privileged classes, religion does not need to produce salvation. Its function is to legitimise their life pattern and social status in society (Weber 1966:107). For Weber, it is also clear that there is a connection between social well-being and divine approval. Good fortune experienced by the individual is, therefore, a sign of divine approval, the opposite being divine disapproval of existence as expressed in human misfortune (Weber 1966:108). Good fortune of the privileged is then legitimised religiously. For the underprivileged or disprivileged classes of society, their need for salvation finds expression in various forms of religion (Weber 1966:108).

Religion is not static. Weber indicates that changes in religion obviously take place under certain conditions. When the privileged ruling classes lose political control or political influence, religion is determined to take on a salvific form (Weber 1966:121, 122). The point Weber makes is that, under certain social conditions, religious affiliation and religious form can change.

## 2.2 The conditions identified by Weber as leading to the demise of religion

Kippenberg (2011:75) indicates how Weber's sociology of religion was read as a theory of secularisation. However, Kippenberg is of the opinion that this does not do justice to Weber's theory. The disenchantment of this world contributes to new types of religiosity (Kippenberg 2011:75). Weber's contention is that religion will not exist for ever. Under certain conditions, religion will stop to exist or take on different forms. Meaning moves away from the objective to the subjective; institutional religion

makes way for individual religiosity (Kippenberg 2011:75). According to Weber, the following conditions contribute to the change of religion.

### 2.2.1 Rationalisation

One of the first enemies of religion is the human tendency to rationalise. Weber (1966:124; 1958:35) differentiates between different classes in society. The intellectuals tend to seek meaning in reality by rational means (Weber 1966:125). This exercise in rationalism suppresses the belief in magic and causes the world to become disenchanted (Weber 1966:125). The process of rationalisation demystifies the world (Krüger *et al.* 2009:277). The mysterious in the world is explained rationally, leaving the world devoid of mystery and secrets. Weber (1966:125) called this the “world-fleeing intellectualist religion”. Rationalism leaves no room for the transcendental to operate in the empirical world. Every mysterious event now has a logical, rational explanation. All empirical phenomena have a clearly defined meaning. Religion has become obsolete.

According to Weber’s (2003:40) analysis, Protestants seem to be more prone to economic rationalism. Weber suggests that Protestants, in particular, seem to promote rationalism as a means to find prosperity (Krüger *et al.* 2009:277). Wealth and worldly prosperity have been interpreted by Protestant groups to indicate the blessing and grace which the transcendental has bestowed upon them (Weber 1966:108, 148). This love for the material and worldly possessions will ultimately distract attention from religion (Weber 2003:42) and lead to, what Weber (2003:40) calls, secularisation. Weber (2003:43) concludes by indicating that Calvinism, a Protestant stream in Christianity, is the seedbed for capitalist economy. Thus, through rationalism and materialism, Protestants will bring about secularisation which will lead to the demise of religion. As the process of rationalisation (part of human nature) has not ended and will probably only intensify over time, it is predicted, along Weber’s line of argumentation, that religion will ultimately have no place in society and become totally obsolete.

### 2.2.2 Loss of economic and political power

The future of religion is closely linked to economic and political factors in society. A change in the social stratification can cause a change in religion. Weber (1966:122) identifies the loss or change of political power as one factor that may change religion. Salvation religion, the product of intellectuals, as opposed to traditional religion, was developed by the socially privileged groups in society:

The tendency toward affiliation with an ethical, rational, congregational religion is more apt to be found the closer one gets to those classes which have been carriers of modern rational productive economic activity (Weber 1966:94).

Traditional religion operates according to what Weber (1966:9) calls “mythological thinking”. Salvation religions belong in the hands of the intellectuals (Weber 1966:121). The less intellectual classes in society tend to follow traditional religion. However, as soon as the ruling intellectual class loses their political (and consequently economic power), salvation religion sets in to become the permanent religion of the nation (Weber 1966:122). This happens especially where the power is taken up by a “bureaucratic, militaristic imperial state” (Weber 1966:122).

This results in the change and not necessarily the disappearance of religion. Parsons concludes from Weber’s theory that one of the major functions of religion is its contribution as a factor for change (Weber 1966:xxx). It is clear that Weber’s approach to religion is to determine how religion brings about social change rather than stabilise society, as Durkheim views the role of religion.

One can only wonder what effect current political turmoil in many countries will have on religion. The shift in political power of the different strata in society must have, according to Weber’s theory, an effect on the religion of every social level in society.

## 2.3 Lines followed after Weber

Many theories on secularisation followed the theory of Weber, indicating how Protestantism, in particular, created the conditions conducive to secularisation. The main contention was that religion no longer played the dominant role in public life in Western society as it once did. It is uncertain whether this description of Western society only referred to the role Christianity played in public life. The absence of Christianity from public life does not make society secular. Does the secular theory also describe a society without the public influence of Islam, Buddhism, Judaism or Hinduism?

Sweeney (2008:15) continues along Weber’s line of argument that rationalisation and modernity cause secularisation. Part of the result of modernity is the birth of sociology. Sociology was the method used to explain the emergence of modernity (Sweeney 2008:15).

Berger (1999:2) acknowledges that, at one stage, he contributed to this flow of information supporting the theory of secularisation. For

Berger (1969:107), secularisation refers to “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols”. Berger’s theory makes more sense in the light of Durkheim’s (2008:36) distinction between the sacred and the profane which characterises the world in which human beings exist. The purpose of Berger’s apparent analysis was to evaluate the way in which society understands its own position in the world, the world view and the position of humanity as viewed from a non-religious perspective. In terms of Durkheim’s distinction, the strict separation between secular and profane is disappearing. For some members of society, some elements might still be considered to belong to the profane; for other members of society, the same elements might be considered to belong to the secular. Sundermeier (1999:12) attests to this when he indicates how religion in society went through a process which he calls the “erosion of religion”, affecting not only institutional religion, but also the role religion plays in popular culture.

Berger’s description clarifies the subjective and objective side of secularism. Berger (1967:15) professed that the objective side of secularisation would be carried by the loss of organised religion’s influence. The influence of religion on the public domain would become less visible. Arts, philosophy and even literature would exhibit less influence by religion. Sundermeier (1999:12) describes a society where the religious influence on social institutions such as marriage and education has disappeared. Knowledge of religious symbols has dissipated. On the other hand, a subjective side to secularisation is to be noted (Berger 1967:15, 16). Individuals in society no longer exhibit the need for the concept of the transcendental (the sacred in Durkheim’s terms). The understanding of the world, humanity and ethics are no longer determined by religion. People affiliate less with formal religious institutions, but rather fall back on a subjectively constructed universe filled with selected religious elements.

Berger (1967:133) refers to this as the “privatisation of religion”. Religion is no longer a public matter, but a personal one. Sundermeier (1999:12) attests to this, by indicating how this emphasis on the profane instead of the sacred does not mean the end of religion. The growth of new religious movements and the resurgence of fundamentalism and esotericism merely prove that religion seeks new ways of expression, no longer institutionally, but privately (Sundermeier 1999:13).

Berger (1969:16) claims that the demise of religion is due to the influence of modern economy. According to Berger, any society engaging with modern economic policies, applying technology and following the route of industrialisation will consequently become a secularised community. It is clear how Berger takes up the notion of Weber, by indicating the role of

economic and political factors that influence religion. These social factors drive religion from the public sphere to the private sphere. This was the way in which Berger analysed the world in which he lived during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The problem with Weber's theory is anachronism. Not as if to say that Weber made the mistake of anachronism, but those who currently apply Weber's theory are guilty of anachronism. Weber lived in a different world than ours. Weber's world was not the pluralistic society we know, with diverse religious and cultural affiliations and globalised economy.

Weber is correct in the sense that a world explained (rationally) has no need of the mysterious workings of the transcendental. Where human beings are so in control (economically and politically), there is no need for supernatural assistance and intervention. In a world of material abundance where every commodity is readily available, man has no need of supernatural provision. As to the future of the human soul, a projection of an existence after this life in the superlative luxuries of this world provides comfort. Weber is then correct in assuming that rationality and capitalism made this world devoid of the transcendental.

### 3. THE GROWTH OF RELIGION

#### 3.1 Durkheim's perspective

This article is not an attempt to provide an extensive overview of the thoughts of Durkheim. It is rather an attempt to illustrate from a sociological point of view how the future of religion can be perceived. Durkheim provides an important perspective on the future of religion.

To understand Durkheim's position on the perseverance of religion it is necessary to explain his understanding of the basic elements of religion. As opposed to Weber, Durkheim directed his attention at analysing the essence of religion whereas Weber tried to understand the function and effect of religion on society.

Durkheim identifies the concept of the sacred as underlying his understanding of religion. He developed this concept over time and captured it in several of his lectures which existed before he published his well-known book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). The concept of the sacred is a much broader concept than religion. To understand the concept of the sacred it must be seen in opposition to the contra-point of the profane. Man's way of understanding reality is by way of the dichotomy of the division between the sacred and the profane

(Pickering 1984:118). This division of the world is a subjective activity originating from man.

The dualism exists in his head. Man has devised it. It comes to the individual from society and is, as it were, turned back on society in order that man may understand it (Pickering 1984:118).

Paden (2011:34) however indicates how Durkheim's division between the sacred and the profane would have been better understood had Durkheim stated clearly that the sacred and the profane do not signify "a class of things", but rather of relationships to things.

This human activity to divide the world along the lines of sacred and profane, Durkheim (2008:36) traced back to the dual human nature. Man consists of body and soul (Durkheim 2008:52). The soul is concerned with that which is sacred and the body is concerned with that which is profane. These two spheres are not divided along qualitative lines as if the one is of higher value than the other (Pickering 1984:119). Durkheim continues to describe human nature along the lines of the duality, by indicating that the profane is associated with all that is individual and the sacred with all that is collective (Pickering 1984:120). The result is that all that is considered sacred results from social activity, and all that is considered profane results from the individual impressions.

Durkheim means with the sacred that which is consecrated or holy (Pickering 1984:126). The sacred refers to that which is set apart, that which society holds in its highest esteem (Pickering 1984:126). For Durkheim that which is considered sacred has a transcendental quality (Pickering 1984:126) and can refer to anything (Durkheim 2008:36). The profane is that which opposes (Durkheim 2008:38) and undermines and attempts to destroy the sacred (Pickering 1984:126). These two, sacred and profane have no contact and remain of separate nature (Durkheim 2008:39).

Sundermeier indicates how the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane makes human existence in the world possible. For Sundermeier (1999:71) the defining of the sacred enables the existence of the profane. The holy separates that which is not profane from the profane, segregating thus the area where man can exist from the area which is considered to be transcendental or of divine nature. This separation between the sacred and the profane creates the borders not only between the divine and the secular, but also between people and places considered to be of sacred or profane nature (Sundermeier 1999:72). Durkheim illustrates along the same lines how the sacred place and time is separated from the profane (2008:229).

For Durkheim sacred is associated with community life and the profane with the life of the individual (Pickering 1984:130). This however does not sanctify society. Society is merely seen as the place where the sacred is constructed. For Durkheim all that is considered sacred eventually ends up in a realm (domain or kingdom) of the sacred which ends up as an abstract entity (Pickering 1984:130). The content of this entity differs from society to society (Pickering 1984:130). Society becomes the entity that determines what is sacred and what not (Durkheim 2008:18). In every society the concept of the sacred exists (Pickering 1984:133).

Pickering's summary of the characteristics of the sacred helps to understand the concept (1984:150-159):

- The sacred is *universal*. In all societies certain elements are regarded as having a sacred status.
- The sacred is *irreducible*. It is impossible to reduce the understanding of the sacred to another perspective. The sacred can only be studied from the view of sociology. Elements considered to be sacred are determined so by the particular society they belong to. Such elements are subject to time and culture.
- The sacred is an *ultimate* category. There is no higher category in religion and society than the sacred. The concept of the sacred stands above and independent of the idea of the gods. The gods receive high status only when the sacred is bestowed upon them. The sacred creates the gods.
- The sacred has a specific *location*. Society is the dispenser of the sacred. The sacred therefore is a social fact and part of collective conscience. The sacred is located in collective beliefs and ideals. The individual does not determine what is sacred. What is social is sacred.
- The sacred is *indivisible*. Although the sacred is spiritual, it can still be destroyed. The profane threatens the sacred and therefore it is in need of protection.
- The sacred is *contagious*. A sacred element can make other elements sacred as well by merely way of association.
- The sacred has *emotional* content. Society creates that which is sacred. Society maintains the status of sacredness by way of ritual. To not realise what is sacred in society is to neglect the task of socialization. The individual once accepting that which is sacred becomes emotionally attached to it. The individual seeks the closeness of that which is considered sacred.

- The sacred remains *mysterious*. The sacred is not to be analysed rationally. The very nature of the sacred elevates it above the empirical and the profane.

Durkheim strongly holds that the two elements, the sacred and the profane, will never destroy or absorb the other (Pickering 1984:148). Neither will disappear. Both will exist in balance (Durkheim 2008:38).

Asad (2003:182) gives a different understanding of how the relationship between religion and the secular can be viewed. "What is distinctive about "secularism" is that it presupposes new concepts of "religion", "ethics" and "politics" ..." (Asad 2003:3). This leads Asad to conclude that secularism is a political doctrine and a description that secularism is the separation of secular and religious, is an under-evaluation of secularism (Asad 2003:3).

Asad (2003:182) indicates that it is no longer viable to distinguish between the sacred and secular spheres in reality and claim that religion is concerned only with the sacred. According to Asad religion operates in the sacred as well as the secular (2003:182). This refutes Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and profane. Asad (2003:30) points out that in premodern writing there is no evidence of a separation between sacred and profane. Religion is just as active in the private as the public sphere (Asad 2003:183).

Asad's (2003:30) analysis is that Durkheim and the followers of his line of thought took Robertson Smith's notion of "taboo" as being the typical form of primitive religion and turned it into the concept of the sacred as a universal essence. The concept of the sacred originated from the research by anthropologists and was under the influence of comparative religion developed further and only later on taken over by theologians (Asad 2003:31). The concept of the secular was only later introduced after contact with other non-Christian religions (the non-European world) (compare Asad 2003:32). Secular was then an etiquette to indicate falsity and otherness in comparison to one religion (in this case European Christianity) (Asad 2003:33). The profane was the unmasking of those pretending to be sacred (Asad 2003:33).

For our discussion it is necessary to take note of the connection Durkheim makes between religion and its social origin. The earliest works of Durkheim reflects his notion that religion is essentially a social phenomenon (Pickering 1984:262). Religion was considered by Durkheim to be a social institution alongside other social institutions (Pickering 1984:264). For Durkheim all institutions (religion included) are organic and can therefore be born, grow and change. Religion however seem to function as a primal institution, supporting other institutions (Pickering 1984:264).

Religion determines the complete social life (compare Weber's similar position 1966:11). According to Pickering (1984:268) Durkheim holds that religion is derived from society, but religion in fact is the origin of society. This is based on Durkheim's thesis that all ideas and all institutions have religious ideas and institutions as its base (Pickering 1984:266).

The result however is that society produces religious ideas (Pickering 1984:193). For Durkheim religion exists as a power in society protecting society from the selfishness of the individual (Pickering 1984:194). Religion therefore exists to further that which is good for society. When religion loses its power in society it no longer can protect society from the individual agitation for power. This position of Durkheim must be seen against the backdrop of his own time. The upsurge in the liberal humanism promoted the individual's free will (Pickering 1984:195). Against this Durkheim maintained the position of society over against the individual's attempt at furthering personal interest.

Within this perspective Durkheim presented a definition of religion:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherence in a single moral community called a church<sup>4</sup> (2008:46).

As to the perseverance of religion, being our main concern here, Durkheim states:

There is something eternal in religion, then that is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively cloaked itself (2008:322).

For Durkheim this perseverance of religion is based on the nature of society:

No society can exist that does not feel the need ... to sustain and reaffirm the collective feelings and ideas that constitute its unity and its personality (2008:322).

Society is the producer of all great ideas according to Durkheim. As long as society exist, religion will continue to exist (compare Pickering 1984:220).

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4 The word "church" does not have the intention to limit the definition to a Christian understanding. As Durkheim himself indicates (2008:46) the word "church" is used to indicate the collective nature of religion.

### 3.2 Durkheim on secularisation

Durkheim, after analysing the social order of his time, came to the conclusion that religion is on the decline or in regression (Pickering 1984:442). This was not only true of traditional religion but also Christianity proved to be dying according to Durkheim (Pickering 1984:442).

For Durkheim the organic nature of religion enabled religion to be born, to grow and eventually die. This process was inevitable as endless. Durkheim's understanding of what is now referred to as secularisation falls out in two separate headings: the changing of religion all together and the change or decline of religion within society (Pickering 1984:442). On the latter issue Durkheim acknowledged the process of religion dying but simultaneously acknowledging the perseverance of religion. This reflects Durkheim's description of the situation in his own time but also his understanding of the normative role of religion.

The more primitive a society is the more influence religion has on society (Pickering 1984:443). The opposite of course being that the less influence religion has on society the more modern society has become. This is one of the peculiarities of Durkheim, suggesting a society becomes more religious when it regresses to its original form. Regression would then be positive as it denotes a return to religious dominance in society.

The decline of religious influence in society is for Durkheim not something new (Pickering 1984:445). From the first communities with religious dominance man has slowly been evolving into societies where religion plays a lesser role.<sup>5</sup> Durkheim proclaimed that religion will play a diminishing role in social life (Pickering 1984:446). As time passes social institutions like politics, economy and science free itself from religion, growing into a situation of increasing individual freedom (Pickering 1984:446).

Durkheim does not regard the demise of religion as a total disappearance of religion. For Durkheim religion will regress into the personal sphere, disappearing perhaps from the public arena (Pickering 1984:447). In this regard Weber and Durkheim differ on the future of religion (Weber more negative on the position religion might take on, Durkheim clearly indicating religion becoming a personal matter).

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5 This contention is opposed by Robert Bellah's theory (*Religion in Human Evolution* 2011, Harvard University Press: London) that religion does change by way of evolution. Change does not eradicate religion, but rather results in different forms or functions of religion in society.

Casanova provides clarity in this regard. Secularisation can be categorised into three different categories:

secularisation as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions, secularisation as decline in religious beliefs and practices, and secularisation as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere (Casanova 1994:211).

When these three categories are viewed it is clear how some observations of religious activities might be mistakenly labelled as secularisation, when there is in fact a better descriptive term.

In spite of Durkheim's negative evaluation of the regression of religion in an European context, he still remains positive about the future of religion. He is strongly convinced that religion will continue to exist (Pickering 1984:452). For Durkheim it is not as much the disappearance of religion that is at hand but the changing of religion. The old will pass, the new will be born (Pickering 1984:453). This reflects the understanding by Durkheim that the changing of society includes religious change. Religion changes as the society of which it is part changes (Pickering 1984:453). Compare in this regard Robert Bellah's (2011) theory.

In short, Durkheim is convinced that religion will change as society changes. Durkheim is just as convinced that religion will persist. The old religion might die out, but the new religion will be born. This creative process is part of society and human nature (Pickering 1984:476). As long as man lives together in community man will continue to have religion. This, Durkheim predicts enthusiastically and with certainty. The form the future religion will take on he is not willing to predict (Pickering 1984:476). Weber is however not so convinced about the future existence of religion. Casanova (1994:18) summarizes Durkheim's and Weber's work by indicating that their diagnosis were similar but that they did not share the same prognosis of the future of religion.

### 3.3 Lines followed after Durkheim

Several scholars agreed on the prediction about the future of religion Durkheim made. Where Peter Berger apparently during the 1960's and 1970's was of the opinion that religion will stop existing, he changed his mind during the 1990's creating a new theory.

Where Berger was quite negative about the persistence of religion, he now was convinced that religion will not only persist, but will grow. "The world today is massively religious, is anything but the secularized world that had been predicted ..." (Berger 1999:9). The old secularisation theory

might be true in some instances, but in general Berger finds the theory that “secularity will triumph”, “unpersuasive” (1999:12).

Berger analyses two separate contexts and come to the conclusion that what has previously been branded as secularisation is in fact not. The “massively secular Euro-culture” Berger determines, exhibit what he would rather call the “widespread alienation from the organized church” or “a shift in the institutional location of religion” (1999:10). This is a much more accurate description of the situation in Europe. This corresponds to what Weber and Durkheim described as the changes in society that will bring about changes in religious behaviour. On the American context, Berger remarks that “Americans are much more religious as well as more churchly than Europeans” (1999:10).

It is clear to Berger that the current European society did not discard religion completely, but that it would be more accurate to describe a change in the form of religion than depicting the situation as secularised. Berger admits that there is indeed an “international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education” that he would regard as secularised (1999:10). In spite of this secularised grouping in society, Berger identifies an international religious upsurge (1999:11). The character of this upsurge is twofold: religiously motivated but also protesting “against a secular elite” (Berger 1999:11).

Berger provides three reasons for the unexpected upsurge in religion:

- Certainty against uncertainty (1999:11): Where any paradigm undermines certainties man experiences in society, a discomfort is created and the seedbed for religious upsurge is prepared. When any religious movement steps into society promising certainty, society will immediately grasp the opportunity to regain certainty.
- Resisting and opposing the secularised elite in society (1999:11): When a section of society promotes a secular view of reality threatening the beliefs and values of society, the majority of society will reject this view and follow religious movements which proclaim anti-secular sentiments.
- Human nature (1999:13): It is part of human nature to find meaning outside of this empirical world. The search for meaning is more severe in cultures that have been without any “transcendent point of reference”.

The very nature of man contributes to the survival and persistence of religion. Berger’s (1999:13) definition of religion illustrates this.

It is part of human nature to search for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world. When this search for meaning is halted by way of secularisation, human condition will be without transcendence. This will leave man impoverished in an untenable condition.

This “untenable condition” of meaninglessness motivates man to continue the search for meaning, bringing about the perseverance of religion. The form religion takes on might change due to society that changes. In this regard Berger shares Durkheim’s position that the future religion will take on a different form: religion becoming a personal matter (compare Pickering 1984:447).

Following in Durkheim’s line of argumentation, Thomas Luckmann holds the theory of religion, instead of dying out in society, will end up in an invisible form; religion is still a dimension of existence of the individual and society, “but is empty of specific empirical content” (1967:78). In line with Durkheim and Berger, Luckmann suspects that religion will disappear from the public eye and become “a private affair” (1967:86). This is based on one of the consequences of modernity and rationalisation, putting the individual at the centre, forcing the individual to find ways of self-expression separate from a collective identity (Luckmann 1967:70,76). What in fact happened according to Luckmann is not necessarily the disappearance of religion as the change in form religion underwent.

#### 4. PREDICTIONS ON RELIGION

New appraisals of the current position of religion in society brought surprising results. Norris and Inglehart (2004) critically evaluates the secularisation theory and come to the conclusion that the predictions made by Weber and even Durkheim proved to be incorrect (2004:9). Their conclusion is based on several international surveys done in different societies and among different religions (2004:6). The results of such surveys show: Weber’s prediction that rationality will erode the belief in the metaphysical and create scepticism about the existence of God, proved to be wrong. Religion is indeed alive and well, even among the most industrialized societies (2004:9). Where Durkheim predicted that the function of religious activities in industrialized societies will eventually die out leaving society without the stabilising effect of religious activities, proved to be incorrect. Surveys show how a resurgence of religious activities spans the globe among all kinds of societies (Norris & Inglehart 2004:10).

The conclusion Norris & Inglehart comes to is that secularisation has not played out as predicted by its advocates. If religion then stubbornly

resists eradication, and religion persuasively proves to be persistent, what are the social conditions that contribute to this perseverance of religion? What are the conditions conducive to the perseverance of religion?

## 4.1 Conditions conducive to the perseverance of religion

### 4.1.1 Pluralism

One of the problems not addressed by Weber nor Durkheim is the effect pluralism has on society. Durkheim, Weber and to a lesser degree Berger, are all analysing and predicting from a context of a homogenous society. There is not much diversification in the society they are describing.<sup>6</sup> Norris and Inglehart indicate how a pluralistic society, consisting of multiple cultures and religions not only threaten traditional religion but especially create an open market environment where the provision of options of religions available to society stimulates religious activities: "... vigorous competition between religious denominations has a positive effect on religious involvement" (Norris & Inglehart 2004:12). The basic premise behind this conclusion is that greater religious pluralism will increase religious participation (Norris & Inglehart 2004:24). This line of thinking is supported by Stark and Bainbridge (1985:430-431).

The one-culture equals one-religion context is conducive to what Norris and Inglehart refer to as "socialized religion" (2004:12) or what is popularly known as "civil religion" (Johnstone 2004:153). Robbins (2004:356) defines civil religion as

the set of beliefs, rites and symbols that sacralise the values of the society and place the nation in the context of an ultimate system of meaning.

The root of this understanding is introduced by Durkheim when he suggests that society is sanctified and therefore society itself is worshipped (Pickering 1984:232). It is however clear that the divine and society are not set as equal exchangeable alternatives (Pickering 1984:232). For Durkheim the reality is society and God is the symbolic expression of it (Pickering 1984:232).

Civil religion reflects a community with a single religious affiliation in society that is supported by government, creating a religious monopoly.

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6 The assumption is that Weber and Durkheim reflect on a European context, and Berger on a North American context.

Robbets (2004:356) makes mention of the national cohesion that civil religion creates. The ideals of the nation and religion overlap. The one serves the other. All belonging to the particular nation is automatically regarded as belonging to the same religion (Johnstone 2004:153). The existence of the nation is regarded as being sanctified by a divine power calling the nation to a divine task (Johnstone 2004:153). The result is a complacent community of quite often nominal believers. This complacency without religious competition might lead to the disappearance or under-evaluation of religious activities and beliefs that characterises “secularised societies”. The opposite would be when religious diversity encourages a conscious decision by members of society to take up specific religious values and participate in particular religious activities. A pluralistic community therefore contributes to the perseverance of religion.

Although research done in this regard is considered by some (compare Chaves and Gorski in Norris & Inglehart 2004:13) to be unreliable, it is still a factor that needs our attention as this current description of society did not characterise the communities Weber or Durkheim were exposed to. This theory, in spite of critique, seems to be true of many communities in the world (Norris & Inglehart 2004:24).

Berger does not evaluate pluralism as positive as others. For Berger the possibility of the existence of alternative world views causes the individual to consciously select one world view. By choosing, the individual relativizes all possibilities causing the individual to be less sure of the choice they make (1967:125). This can only lead to a situation when all is considered to be sacred, nothing is in fact sacred; leading to the demise of religion due to relativism. In this way pluralism not only contributes to the growth of religion as Norris and Inglehart suggest, but pluralism can just as easily contribute to the demise of religion according to Berger.

### 4.1.2 Individualism

One of the areas Durkheim is criticised on is his lack of paying enough attention to the role of the individual in furthering the case of religion (compare Pickering 1984:195). This matter has been thoroughly addressed by Weber when he refers to the many roles individuals can take on furthering the case of religion in society (Weber 1966:28-30,46-47).

Since the Reformation and Renaissance emphasis has been put on the autonomy of the individual. Religion tends to be less a collective affair. This is emphasised when Durkheim, Berger and Luckmann states that religion will become a personal matter. The emphasis on the role of the

individual when it comes to the position of religion in society has been neglected in research.

Thomas Luckmann provides some direction in this debate. For Luckmann (1967:70) personal identity is a form of religiosity. Individual identity for Luckmann consists of values, attitudes and an understanding of the self. All of these elements give sense and meaning to life. This individual sense of identity comprises religiosity. In this way religion becomes invisible and personal as none of these elements (values and attitudes) are expressed visibly in public.

There are those who indicate the opposite. Casanova (1994:5) disagrees with this analysis. According to Casanova secularisation exists, but secularisation did not bring about the complete end of religion nor the regression of religion into the private sphere professed by Durkheim, Berger and Luckmann. After careful analysis Casanova concludes that religion thrives as institution in society. This implies that religion indeed went through a change as has been predicted and foreseen, but the change did not remove religion from the public eye. In fact religion is considered to have a new visibility in society (Sweeney 2008:17).

The problem then, is whether religion can currently be seen as a private or public matter? If seen as something private (invisible from the public eye) does religion then have any significance for society, and if then how and what? How should religion be defined if religion is confined to the personal choice and practice of the individual? Or is religion still to be regarded as visible in society and through its social intervention exert influence on society? Is the new visibility of religion a new form of religion, and if so, what changed in the nature of religion?

Berger maintains the position that religion is embedded in society. Again Berger's argument that pluralistic religious ideas in society contribute to relativism and therefore secularisation, applies here (1967:125). If each and every individual were to make a choice on what is acceptable religion, it would relativize religion to such a degree that religion would surely become obsolete. The credibility of religion for Berger is connected to social consensus. Something can only be considered to be religion when it is acknowledged so by others. Again Durkheim's theory, namely the very nature of religion is its irrevocable connection to its social origin, applies. This portrays the notion that in order for religion to survive the needs and ideas of the individual, is subject to that of society. The supremacy of society above the individual is maintained.

This point is attested as modernity emphasises the autonomy of the individual (Sweeney 2008:18). Religion has a subjective as well as an

objective side to it. On the subjective side stands man with a unique need and religious experience. On the other side exists the religious tradition that has been passed down for generations and has been acknowledged by society as being religion and now it is presented to the individual.

The problem is if one or the other of the subjective or objective is over-emphasised. Sweeney (2008:18) refers to research conducted by Heelas and Woodhead to investigate religion in Northern England. The result of the research was that where the subjective side of religion, the position of the individual, was over-emphasised, Heelas and Woodhead would call the result “spirituality” which differs from religion. Spirituality refers to “self-oriented perceptions” and “new self-affirming practices” as opposed to religion which is regarded as “authoritarian, restrictive of the self and out of tune” with the needs of the individual (Sweeney 2008:19). This gives an indication of what the new form of religion when regarded as a personal matter (as predicted by Durkheim and Luckmann), might take on: mere spirituality. The problem with spirituality is exactly what Berger indicated as being so subjective that society has no say whether such convictions can be considered as religion and therefore relativizing religious ideas to extinction. Sweeney (2008:19) evaluates spirituality as “a privatized variant of religion, lacking social significance and further evidence of secularisation”, echoing Berger’s fears.

This does however not imply that the individual has no say. Society can still agree on what constitutes religion. The practice of religion becomes a private matter. In their private capacity individuals can still exert (religious) influence on society. Religion then still remain embedded in society, but now as expressed by individuals and not as expressed and prescribed by society.

### 4.1.3 Postmodernity and uncertainty

Although modernity provided man with the intellectual tools to understand the empirical world through the lens of science, enabling the application of technology and resulting in the attempted mastering of the universe, man still experiences limitations. In spite of the existence of advanced technology and science, the situation still exists that some communities experience uncertainty and insecurity due to exposure to risk (i.e. poverty, unavailability of food, disease, premature death and violence). These “uncontrollable” elements in society create an environment of uncertainty. These conditions are prevalent among poorer communities as wealthier communities have the means to procure risk-limiting measures (compare Norris’ & Inglehart’s analysis of these scenario’s 2004:14-17).

According to Berger any paradigm bringing uncertainty to any member of society might result in a resurgence of religion (1999:11). As uncertainty creates the need for certainty, any religion providing the promise of certainty will endure. Norris and Inglehart (2004:18) echoes this conviction:

the experience of growing up in less secure societies will heighten the importance of religious values, while conversely experience of more secure conditions will lessen it.

The underlying premise to this conclusion is that “the need for religious reassurance becomes less pressing under conditions of greater security” (Norris & Inglehart 2004:18).

The problem with this thesis is that the implication would be that highly developed communities will exhibit less religious traits than lesser developed communities. In reality this is however not the case. Norris and Inglehart (2004:18) address this dilemma by indicating how developed communities will be prone to be less engaged in spiritual activities although a residual element of religion will remain in society providing a trace of former religious identity. Religious cultural traditions tend to leave behind impressions on the moral beliefs of society and even these traces can erode over time depending on the intensity of secularization (Norris & Inglehart 2004:20). The erosion becomes evident in the lack of participation in religious activities in society.

What then about under-developed communities exposed to conditions creating uncertainty? In these communities with lesser development, religious behaviour tends to be different. In conditions creating uncertainty, religious activities will flourish. The result, Norris and Inglehart (2004:22) come to is that poor nations will remain deeply religious. This proves Weber’s thesis when he postulates that Christian ethics especially with its contribution to the advance of capitalism and thereby development will contribute to the demise of religion. Religion then causes change in society and the change in society causes change in religion.

Research done by Norris and Inglehart (2004:25) indicates that the world is not moving towards being a more developed and secularized community. Rather the opposite is happening. There seem to be more people now with religious affiliation than ever before. This is due to the population explosion among poorer communities where religion tends to be prevalent.

It is clear from the research done by Norris and Inglehart (2004:27) that the levels of secularisation do not increase as rationalisation increases, as Weber suggested. Much rather the level of secularisation is dependent on the level of security a community experiences. The higher the level of

security the higher the level of secularisation becomes (Norris & Inglehart 2004:27). This results in a totally new theory of secularisation no longer based on the level of rationalisation or industrialisation but depending on the level of existential security.

Uncertainty becomes the driver behind religion. This is supported by Robberts (2004:313) when he asserts that secularisation does not necessarily mean the decline of religion, but that traditional religions are merely reformed by secularisation leading to the creation of new religious movements. Secularisation therefore does not end religion but can even assist religion to grow. Compare in this regard Asad's (2003:182) remarks referred to earlier on regarding the relationship between the sacred and the profane.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Some important consequences follow from the analysis of the theories by Weber, Durkheim and others:

Secularisation is no longer an appropriate term to describe the process of religious demise. As is clear from Robberts (2004:313), the concept secularisation can even contribute to the growth of religion. The understanding of what secularisation is needs to be revised. The degree of secularisation can no longer be measured in terms of the degree of rationalisation, but rather in terms of the degree of insecurity a society experiences.

Religion is not dead. No obituary is necessary, and apparently will not be necessary for some time. Religion according to the statistical proof offered by Norris and Inglehart (2004) is growing and well.

Religion is not static. What becomes clear from Weber, Durkheim and others following in their footsteps is that religion changes form, quite often and quite rapidly. This might be due to different factors: Weber holds that as society changes, religion changes. Durkheim, Berger, Luckmann and others hold that religion will end up out of the public eye, restricted to a personal and private matter.

The role of the individual choice will influence the future of religion. The autonomy of the individual can contribute to secularisation (as Berger believes), or create widespread spirituality (as Sweeny indicates). Religion however remains at best embedded in society.

Two of the consequences of modernity that has not yet been addressed are fundamentalism and atheism. As to atheism, it of course can be one

of the results of secularisation. People may become totally averse towards religion and forsake all forms of religion. This is one of the measurable results of secularisation but not necessarily the biggest result.

Another response to rationalisation and modernisation is to take refuge in the familiar and traditional. This response is called fundamentalism by Krüger, Lubbe and Steyn (2009:289). Fundamentalism should not be seen as regression, as moving backwards in terms of moving away from progression. Fundamentalism in short refers to the holding on to tested truths of the past that provided security. In this manner fundamentalism is a logical and acceptable response to modernisation. It can however only provide temporary security before a untenable schizophrenia sets in. The conditions creating uncertainty in society will not pass. Changes in society demand new responses. To answer the questions in the present with answers of the past can only be tolerated for so long. Changed conditions require new formulations of the truths<sup>7</sup> of the past.

This process can be painful as it creates uncertainty. Answers must still be discovered and for that moment it creates the terrible condition of being without answers. If a new answer cannot be found at once, the next best option is to refer back to old answers as the only response. The answers are old, but man still remains in the changed context of the present, therefore the schizophrenia.

Is there a correct and incorrect response to the change in society that will demand a change in the form of religion? Every response has a risk. Even to decide not to respond to the changed situation in society is a choice. If no clear choice regarding religion is made by the individual, such individual may end up in an alternative, subjective spirituality (compare the remarks made by Krüger, Lubbe & Steyn 2009:289 on alternative spirituality as response to modernity). The individual then selects subjectively what and how to believe (compare Sweeney 2008:19). This only contributes to secularisation.

In selecting to hang on to the tested truths of the past (fundamentalism) may provide some sort of certainty. This is however temporary. Some might convince themselves of the truths of their re-constructed past and become totally blind to any other reality.

To choose to adapt to the new conditions might have the risk of uncertainty about identity. This uncertainty is also temporarily as a new identity becomes set as it is reinforced by way of the stabilising effect of rituals (compare Durkheim's remarks on the stabilising effect of religion

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7 This unfortunate choice of words does not want to open the debate as to the question of truth in religions.

on society 2008:322). The repetitive performance of rituals re-enforces identity and provide society with stability (Durkheim 2008:323).

A final remark on the future of religion might be to indicate the dichotomy of continuity and discontinuity when it comes to religion. There will always be the need to ascertain meaning of life, to follow on Berger's understanding of religion. In this way the concept of religion will remain similar as to how it had been interpreted in the past. The changing social context however will cause a discontinuity to the form religion will take on in each (changed) context that appears in the future. The fact remains, as long as society exists, religion will exist.

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