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Linda WOODHEAD

Gendering Secularization Theory

The author argues that our understanding of secularization can be greatly enhanced by taking gender differences seriously. Whilst existing theories of secularization do a good job of explaining why men disaffiliated from Christianity after the onset of industrialization, they ignore the experience of women—whose experience of modernization was significantly different. Whilst men have been responsible for paid work outside the home, women have been engaged in unpaid care work within the home. Their entrance into the paid labour force since the 1960s has not relieved them of traditional duties of care. It is suggested that we can best understand contemporary women's patterns of religious affiliation and disaffiliation in relation to their working lives, whether embracing domestic employment, or seeking a balance between both forms of labour.

Keywords: religion · secularization · gender · women's employment

L'auteure avance que notre compréhension de la sécularisation peut être grandement améliorée en tenant sérieusement compte des différences de genre. Alors que les théories de la sécularisation existantes permettent de bien expliquer pourquoi les hommes se sont désaffiliés de la Chrétienté dans les débuts de l'industrialisation, elles ignorent l'expérience des femmes—dont celle de la modernisation était, de manière significative, différente. Alors que les hommes étaient responsables du travail rémunéré à l'extérieur du foyer, les femmes ont été enrôlées dans du travail de soin non payé au sein du foyer. Leur entrée dans la main-d'œuvre rémunérée depuis les années 1960 ne les a pas dispensées des tâches traditionnelles de soin. Il est suggéré que nous pouvons mieux comprendre les modèles d'affiliation et de désaffiliation religieuses des femmes contemporaines en faisant un rapprochement avec leur vie professionnelle: ou bien elles s'investissent dans le travail domestique, ou bien elles cherchent un équilibre entre les deux formes de travail.

Mots-clés: religion · sécularisation · genre · travail féminin

1. Religion and gender

The sociology of religion is not blind to gender, yet its central paradigms remain relatively untouched by an awareness of its significance. This is
most obviously true of theories of secularization, which have long constit-
tuted the core curriculum of the subject.

Recently, however, there have been signs of change. Callum Brown’s
The Death of Christian Britain (2001) and its sequel Religion and Society in
Twentieth-Century Britain (2006) remind us of the preponderance of
women in the churches throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and point
to evidence that women are now defecting at a higher rate than men.
Brown argues that any adequate theory of secularization must explain
women’s growing alienation from the churches they once supported. In his
account, the death of Christian Britain begins with the sexual revolution of
the 1960s which frees women from pious forms of femininity which exalt
chastity, modesty, obedience, and responsibility for the moral and spiritual
welfare of husband and children. Before the 1960s women are bound by
‘conservative moral authorities’ and ‘ecclesiastical obsession with sex’.
From then on they ‘revolt against their assigned role of religious and
moral guardians of the nation, rejecting church authority in favour of
sexual liberalism and feminism’ (2006: 16). Thus for Brown, the baby of
Christianity goes out with the bathwater of submissive womanhood.

I want to propose a related but significantly different account of how
existing explanations of secularization can be enhanced by taking account
of changing gender relations. If it is to succeed, such a theory must be able
to do justice to the following evidence, which includes but exceeds that
which Brown is able to explain.

1. Not only has religion declined at the macro, meso and micro levels across
Europe and, to a lesser extent, in North America, but this decline has
accelerated greatly since the 1960s.
2. Women are more religious than men on every index of commitment, out-
numbering them by a ratio of around 3:2 in most churches in both Europe
and America. The typical churchgoer in Europe is now an older woman
(Billiet et al., 2003).
3. For the last decade or so women seem to have been leaving the churches at
a faster rate than men, and this applies both to those who leave in their
teenage years and those who leave in middle age (Brierley, 2003: 2.19.4).
4. Women also outnumber men in those forms of ‘alternative’ spirituality
which have burgeoned since the late 1980s, and which include New
Age, holistic therapies, and neo-paganism. Research in which I was
involved in England between 2000 and 2002 found that women make
up 80 per cent of those who were involved in such spirituality, as both
clients and practitioners, and there are indications that this level of pre-
ponderance may not be untypical (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005).

2. The rhetoric of the sexual revolution

In trying to make sense of such evidence I agree with Brown that we must
start by taking shifts in gender relations seriously, but I think that he
exaggerates the magnitude of the changes that took place in the 1960s.
Part of the reason he succumbs to the rhetoric of a sexual ‘revolution’ is that he dwells on changes in personal attitudes, values, and intimate behaviours to the neglect of what was happening in the public realm of paid and unpaid labour. This, in turn, is related to methodological preference, for Brown follows the fashionable cultural turn in choosing to privilege ‘discourse’ and what people say over structure and what people do.

My argument is that for all the talk of sexual revolution and a shift to gender equality, studies of male and female patterns of work and employment reveal significant continuities and persistent inequalities. To summarize this situation: prior to the 1960s women carried out the vast bulk of unpaid labour in the home. Subsequent to the 1960s they entered into paid employment in unprecedented numbers, so that today almost as many women as men work in the public sphere for a wage. But women continue to carry out traditional duties of unpaid domestic labour and care as well as taking on new duties of paid employment (Hochschild, 1990; Wharton, 2005). So Brown is right about the change, but neglects the continuity. As a result, he fails to see that women’s assumption of a double burden of work hardly amounts to a straightforward revolution, let alone a liberation.

Women today suffer from the effects of what Arlie Hochschild (1990) calls a ‘stalled revolution’ which traps them between two incompatible sets of demands. On the one hand they are expected to tend the bodily and emotional needs of others without expectation of pay or reward. They are to be loving mothers and devoted wives who care for those around them, whether at home or in the workplace. This is entirely congruent with a Christian ethic of love and self-sacrifice, as exemplified by the Christ figure, by Mary, and by the saints—an ethic of ‘to give, and not to count the cost’. On the other hand, however, women are now entering into the workplace alongside men. Some remain in established roles compatible with women’s work of care, such as nursing and other service functions. Others enter into more self-assertive and well-rewarded roles formerly reserved for men—whether as bus drivers, engineers, media professionals, doctors or managers. Those who take the route into traditionally masculine space find themselves having to negotiate a very different form of identity from that conventionally regarded as feminine—an identity which values confidence, assertion, individuality, competitiveness and ambition (all coded masculine) rather than care, compassion and thinking of others before self (all coded feminine).

3. Male and female disaffiliation from religion

Before turning to consider how this ambiguous and conflicted state of identity may help explain women’s relationships with religion, let me shift the attention briefly to men and male disaffiliation from religion. Many existing theories of secularization single out one or more aspects of modernization as responsible for religious decline, including rationalization, bureaucratization, urbanization, societalization and individualization. Behind them all one discerns a similar narrative, which tells how a rural labourer leaves
behind the stable and meaningful world of village life and enters into the modern city where, within the iron cage of factory or office, community gives way to impersonal structures, human meaningfulness is less important than rational efficiency, and the law of competition replaces that of cooperation. In the process the world becomes disenchanted, religion loses its traditional functions, an ethic of duty and self-sacrifice loses its relevance, and our labourer ceases to be a religious believer and belonger. I have no wish to deny the power and plausibility of this way of explaining secularization. But I do want to deny that it does anything more than explain male disaffiliation from religion—for the labourer who leaves the shelter of the sacred canopy is a man, not a woman. For women, industrialization is experienced very differently: as exclusion from the public world and confinement to the home and/or low-paid domestic labour and piecework. Thus women remain urban villagers, carrying tradition into the modern context, feeding not just the survival but the growth of the churches, and easing their menfolk’s experience of the iron cage by offering the humanly-meaningful sanctuary of the home.

So existing theories of secularization do a good job of explaining men’s religious disaffiliation but a bad job of explaining the situation of the other half of the human race—at least until we come to the 1960s and since, when women enter into paid employment and thus start to feel the same pressures as men. But even then such theories fail to do justice to the complexity of the picture because women do not simply enter the world of paid employment on equal terms with men, but find themselves caught between two forms of labour, two sets of obligation, and two forms of identity. They find their lives poised uncomfortably between the world of work and individualization on the one hand and the world of the home and relational care on the other—or between what Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) felicitously refer to as ‘living life for others’ and ‘a bit of a life for myself’.

The consequences for religious commitment are correspondingly complex. Let me simplify by breaking them down into three categories, relating to the three main forms of labour-based identity inhabited by women.

First, women may remain committed to ‘traditional’ roles of domestic work and care. If they do so it is quite likely that they will shelter under the sacred canopy of religion, since conservative forms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam provide just about the only space in western societies these days in which such identity continues to be affirmed and legitimated rather than stigmatized. Liberal commentators often wonder why such apparently sexist religions attract women. The answer is that it is precisely because such religions insist on clear gender differentiation that they appeal to women who want to ‘know their place’, be honoured for their work of care, find support in female solidarities, and protect themselves from divorce and male flight from family commitment (Brasher, 1998; Griffith, 1997).

Second, women may take the opposite path, and abandon traditional roles in favour of ‘having my own career’. To do so they will have to give up having children, or employ a domestic labourer to look after them, or find a good welfare state (probably in Scandinavia). They will also be highly likely to
turn their backs on religion. I have always been struck by Andrew Greeley’s neglected finding that the least well represented group in Catholic churches is college-educated women influenced by feminism whose Catholic mothers were confined to domestic roles during the time their daughters were raised (1990: 230–1). Pre-boomer women are often very well aware of the dynamic. The finding is echoed by an elderly Catholic lady interviewed by one of my MA students who said:

It was the same for everyone... and you accepted it... you saw it [domestic work] as a privilege, like you’d been given an ‘exalted’ role in your own home! [she laughs]... not that young girls, even my own daughter, would see it like that today! She’d laugh at the idea. They would say we were being duped. Maybe we were.

To a far greater extent than men, women who seek career success are under pressure to abandon domestic commitments in favour of commitments to colleagues, employer and, above all, self, self-development and success in the job. In this complex project of completely refashioning identity, traditional forms of religion are more likely to prove a hindrance to women than a help.

So we come to our third, and largest, category of women: those who attempt to ‘juggle’ two sets of commitment and two types of work. Given the ambiguous nature of their identity, some may find existing forms of religion congenial, whilst others will find the opposite (or may simply not have any spare time for religious commitment). Where religion does attract female commitment it is likely to do so because it manages to assist in one way or another in helping women deal with their double dose of commitments. To take a single example, a middle-aged Anglican whom I interviewed recently explained that:

I’m not looking for community... I like to go to church for me, it’s my personal time... what religion is for me is my space, my time... I find the building allows me to focus better... it’s a place I don’t have to think about the washing up or the cooking or the gardening or anything else... And the service can wash over... it does allow that. I just find some of the incidentals very irritating.

Here, religion succeeds not because it sanctifies domestic labour (even though it does), but because it can be used to provide a brief escape from such labour and a space in which to ‘be me’. This is similar to, but far more half-hearted than, the case of alternative spiritualities which seem to be flourishing because they are run largely for women by women, and deal directly with the difficulties of the contemporary feminine condition. My observation in the course of researching such spiritualities is that they make use of a range of body and emotion-focused techniques to assist women in the difficult and novel task of constructing autonomous forms of selfhood. But they do not necessarily serve the construction of a typically masculine mode of independent, self-assertive selfhood. Rather, they fall along a spectrum, depending on whether they emphasize the self-in-relation, or the self-in-relation. So-called New Age practices tend to lie at the more masculine, individualized end of the spectrum and to offer support in separating
the self from dependencies and setting it free for personal success. Holistic and neo-pagan spiritualities are located towards the other end of the spectrum, and tend to be more active in sanctifying distinctly feminine activities (whether miscarrying, birth-giving, childrearing, menstruating, mothering, or magic-making), but on an autonomous basis. Right across this spectrum, alternative spirituality serves as an incubation space for the forging of new forms of identity for those who find the existing options inhospitable.

Conclusion

To sum up, my argument is that fresh attention to the significance of gender can help modify and strengthen existing theories of secularization (and sacralization), and make better sense of the otherwise puzzling findings which I outlined at the start. I have suggested that such analysis is most fruitful when it considers how gender relations are shaped in a range of domains, material and institutional as well as symbolic. More generally still, I am advocating an approach to secularization which is attentive to power relations of all kinds—whether in relation to gender, or class, or ethnicity, or sexuality. The broadest message of all is that religion’s support for, and subversion of, unequal distributions of power in society must be taken more seriously if we are to understand its growth, decline and transformation.

REFERENCES

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