

The Impact of Religion

Current challenges and future
perspectives

Three approaches

The Impact of Religion

- the programme and its context

Current challenges in the study of religion

Future perspectives

Things to celebrate

As IMPACT in its present incarnation comes to an end, there is much to celebrate

Plenary session 2 – an impressive summary of research that need not be repeated

More personally, I want to celebrate two things in particular

- a new generation of scholars
- a growing network of global contacts → increasing numbers of visitors to the CRS

Low points and high points

March 2010 – the Research Council's first checkpoint

- a discouraging experience, which coincided with the eruption of the Icelandic volcano

March 2014 – the mid-term evaluation

- an entirely different experience; the evaluation team visited the CRS, in the (then) new building (a visible sign of the University's support); warm appreciation of what was underway and an unexpectedly pleasing outcome
- what does 'awesome' mean?

Current challenges

There are two:

- the need to escape a Euro (Western)-centric bias in approach/ theory
 - a deep-seated ‘problem’ given the origins of social science in the French Enlightenment
- the need to persuade the **mainstreams** of social science of the *positive* significance of religion

The two are related and will be explored with reference to my work with the International Panel on Social Progress

The Enlightenment and social science

Manuel Vasquez (from El Salvador) – sociology as the epistemological child of the Enlightenment

- rationality/ empirical observation – the ultimate sources of knowledge, as opposed to faith and revelation

Drawing on Auguste Comte – the opposition between theology and sociology is central to incipient sociology's self understanding

Religion as the intellectual and dying 'other'

Secularization is built into the DNA of the discipline

Sources

Manuel Vasquez , 'Grappling with the legacy of modernity: Implications for the sociology of religion', in Courtney Bender et al., *Religion on the Edge: De-Centering and Re-Centering in the Sociology of Religion*. New York: OUP 2013

NB – note the title of the edited volume

See also:

Jim Spickard, *Alternative Sociologies of Religion: Through Non-Western Eyes*. New York: New York University Press 2017

In parenthesis – assumptions about Western social science

Is this applicable/ helpful in other contexts?

My experience with scholars (especially graduate and post doc. students) in different parts of the world (China, Japan, Singapore, Mexico)

- an impressive knowledge of Western paradigms – are these useful/ helpful in entirely different contexts?

Encouraging new approaches

The essence of social scientific theory – the importance of context

- the science and religion debate (David Martin)

Does this matter?

Europe/ the West

- a *relatively* good fit between sociological thinking about religion and empirical realities, keeping in mind regional variations, growing complexities, and unexpected developments (e.g. London, Paris – and indeed Stockholm)

The global context

- universalizing the theory causes trouble
- my/our experience with the IPSP

The International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP)

2015 – an invitation from the IPSP to co-lead (with Nancy Ammerman) the chapter team dealing with religion

- the significance of religion as a factor in social progress on a global scale

A marked shift in attitudes amongst those who work in the field of religion

Much less evident in the mainstreams of the social sciences, where European paradigms persist



Chapter 16 in the ISSP report 1

Starts from the premise that **some 80 percent of the world's population affirms some kind of religious identification**, a proportion that is growing rather than declining

The peak of secularity/ secularism – 1970s

Significant changes in the former Soviet Union and in China

Plus differential birthrates

Note throughout – an emphasis on **lived religion**, rather than belief as such

Chapter 16 in the ISSP report 2

Emphasizes the **significance of belief and practice in everyday lives and local contexts**, analyzing the impact of religion and its relevance to social progress in a wide variety of fields:

- family, gender and sexuality
- diversity and democracy
- conflict and peace-making
- everyday wellbeing
- care for the earth

Further . . .

Argues that researchers and policy makers pursuing social progress will benefit from careful attention to the power of **religious ideas** to motivate, of **religious practices** to shape ways of life, of **religious communities** to mobilize and extend the reach of social change, and of **religious leaders and symbols** to legitimate calls to action

All of these, however, can be put to either good or ill, for which reason assessment of particular religions in specific contexts is essential

In conclusion

Five interconnected themes:

- the persistence of religion in the twenty-first century
- the importance of context in discerning outcomes
- the need for cultural competence relative to religion
- the significance of religion in initiating change
- the benefits of well-judged partnerships

A continuing need for critical but appreciative assessment
and the demonstrable benefits of creative partnerships

Key references

IPSP publications – see <https://www.ipsp.org/> for chapter downloads

*And Rethinking Society for the 21st Century
Report of the International Panel on Social Progress.*
Cambridge: CUP 2018

<http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/politics-international-relations/political-economy/rethinking-society-21st-century-report-international-panel-social-progress#BbrKUisS6u0Jk86U.99>

Grace Davie *Religion in Public Life: Levelling the Ground*. Theos

2017 <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2017/10/28/religion-in-public-life-levelling-the-ground>

Future perspectives

Expecting the unexpected; urban/ rural

- London – Paris – Stockholm

Innovative partnerships

- Laudato Si'
- new technologies

New thinking, new questions

- no longer problem driven; refining the detail; absence as well as presence; what is Europe not?

Expecting the unexpected

GD – *Religion in Public Life* (see above)

- the paradox: Europe continues to secularize but religion has returned to public life (both at once)
- migration and movement → growing diversity
- exposing an acute lack of religious literacy/ cultural competence
- urban/ rural reversals
- the need for new and **imaginative** discourses – the London story

A French footnote – President Macron

Innovative partnerships

Laudato Si' (see above) transforms a primarily scientific discourse into an ethical/moral one

- the Catholic Church – without parallel as a disseminator
- leader in *Nature*

Using new technologies in social-scientific/humanities research

- 'Pilgrimage and England's Cathedrals': see <http://www.pilgrimageandcathedrals.ac.uk/>

new technologies ↔ new imagination ↔ new possibilities
– a virtuous circle ensues

New thinking/ new questions

Reversing the 'normal' question; escaping from problem-based work

Lori Beaman in *Deep Equality*. Oxford: OUP 2017

- the everyday and largely **successful** negotiation of religious diversity

A Norwegian doctoral thesis: why do some migrants **prosper** despite a traumatic past?

Context- based questions; under what circumstances . . .

- examples from IPSP

What is Europe (or indeed anything else) **not**?

- it is not a vibrant religious market as is found in the US
- it is not a part of the world where Christianity is growing exponentially, often in Pentecostal forms, as is found in the global south
- it is not a part of the world dominated by faiths other than Christian, but is increasingly penetrated by these
- it is not for the most part subject to the violence often associated with religion and religious difference in other parts of the globe – the more so if religion becomes entangled in political conflict

Signing off

My thanks