

# The Sociology of Religion

# *eleven*

## religion and the everyday

This chapter introduces a very different perspective; it is concerned with the place of religion in the everyday lives of modern, primarily Western people. How, in other words, do such people relate to what they perceive as religious or spiritual and what difference does this make to their lives? These questions are, and always have been, central to the anthropological agenda. Until recently, however, sociologists had rather lost sight of them, assuming that modern people had not only other interests, but also other frameworks by which to orient their existence. Such is not always the case.

A consistent theme runs through the material: that is, a tendency towards ‘de-differentiation’ in the late-modern world, bearing in mind that this somewhat clumsy term questions many of the assumptions articulated so far, notably Casanova’s firm assertion that ‘[T]he differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms remains a modern structural trend’ (1994: 212). That idea was central to the discussion of secularization in Chapter 3, but it is not the only story. For a start, it was never complete, a fact already acknowledged (p. 50). Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, a whole series of factors came together to suggest that policies grounded on the notion of institutional separation, and taken for granted for much of the post-war period, might be re-examined. The provision of welfare will be taken as an example, drawing extensively on a comparative European project.

Health and healthcare are similar. Here, they will be accessed through a discussion of birth and death – frequently regarded, with some justification, as the most sacred moments of human existence. Are these moments to be defined solely in medical terms or do they still have a religious resonance? And to what extent are they conditioned by the environment in which they take place? Who, finally, is in control? Answers to these questions will be used to exemplify and to extend the discussion of modernity in Chapter 5. Firmly modernist answers about the beginning and end of life are progressively giving way to ever more searching questions, in an environment in which the institutional

boundaries are less and less clear. De-differentiation, finally, is as much an individual as an institutional matter. The concept of ‘well-being’ – an idea already introduced in the paragraphs on holistic forms of religion – will be central to this discussion, in which body, mind *and* spirit all play their part.

The later sections of the chapter evoke similar questions, but they begin from a different perspective. The first of these concerns gender. References to the difference between men and women in terms of their religious lives have been scattered through this book. It is important to gather these together, recognizing that a topic that for several decades was largely ignored in the sub-discipline is now, quite rightly, demanding attention. Indeed the shift in the priorities of the discipline is as important as the topic itself. A similar shift has occurred with respect to age – one that opens a fresh range of possibilities concerning, amongst other things, religious change. Should this be considered in terms of the individual (the life-cycle) or in terms of society (generational shifts), or both? Either way, the discussion of age leads once again to the question of death and the rapidly increasing sociological activity that surrounds this. Death and the existential questions that it raises have, more than anything else, resisted the secular. Is there any reason why this should not still be the case in late modernity? Probably not.

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## DIFFERENTIATION AND DE-DIFFERENTIATION: A RANGE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### **Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective (WREP)<sup>1</sup>**

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Significant sections of this book have been concerned with the differences between Europe and America, not least the existence of a state church in the former and its absence in the latter. A second point follows from this: in the United States, there is not only no state church, but to a considerable extent, no state in the sense that this is understood in Europe. For Europeans, moreover, the state is responsible for welfare, or so we have come to believe. The separating out of welfare as a distinct area of activity is central to the process of secularization in European societies and it is to the state that we look for support in time of need. That is much less the case in America. But even in Europe, the process takes place differently in different societies, leading to distinctive welfare regimes. Specialists in social policy will immediately recognize these differences and categorize them in various ways (Esping-Andersen, 1990).<sup>2</sup> For the sociologist of religion, however, one point is immediately

clear: the patterns that emerge relate very closely to the differences observed by Martin in his work on secularization. Each, in fact, is the mirror of the other.

The material that follows reflects this theme and is drawn very largely from a comparative project on religion and welfare in eight European societies. It is used first to exemplify the different situations regarding these issues in different parts of Europe. In the Nordic countries, for example, the Lutheran churches embrace the doctrine of ‘two kingdoms’, which ascribes a particular role to the state in the organization of social welfare.<sup>3</sup> It follows that the ceding of welfare to the state was achieved relatively easily in this part of Europe. In France, in contrast, the process has been noticeably more acrimonious as the state claims for itself not only the functions of welfare, but the moral authority that once belonged to the Church. Hence a situation of conflict rather than co-operation, in which the boundary between church and state is firmly policed, in welfare as in so much else. Elsewhere in Catholic Europe, Catholic social teaching has been influential in a different way – this time through the concept of subsidiarity.<sup>4</sup> Welfare (as indeed all social policy) should be delivered at the lowest effective level of society, usually the family. Hence, historically, the heavy responsibilities of women as the traditional providers of welfare, supported by the churches rather than the state; the latter, in fact, fills the gaps left by the family and the church, not the other way round – the reverse of what happens in Northern Europe. Something rather similar can be found in Greece, bearing in mind that the Greek situation is framed by Orthodox rather than Catholic theology, bringing with it a noticeably different body of social teaching. Britain, finally, is *sui generis* in European terms; it relies far more than its continental neighbours on the voluntary sector, understanding ‘voluntary’ in every sense of the term.<sup>5</sup>

Hence the complexity of the situation: a similar goal (the separating out of welfare from the influence of the churches and the creation of an autonomous sphere with its own institutional norms) is achieved, or semi-achieved, in markedly different ways. One point is clear, however. European populations are of one mind in thinking that the state *should* take responsibility in this area. That finding emerges from all of the case studies in the WREP project. The fact that the churches are still doing much of the work is seen as a necessary feature of European life, but not ‘how it should be’. The project’s respondents are, nonetheless, realistic:<sup>6</sup> given that the situation is less than perfect, it is just as well that the churches are there, if only to fill the gaps. It follows that their contributions are welcomed rather than rejected even in societies where the welfare state is more rather than less developed.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, a number of factors have come together to question many of these assumptions. Some of these come from outside. European societies are as subject to the swings in the global economy as anyone else and from the 1970s on, almost all European nations experienced both a downturn in economic growth and a corresponding rise in unemployment – a situation which became acute following the 2008 financial crisis. Coincidentally, demographic profiles are altering, leading (as in all advanced economies) to an increase both in the numbers and in the proportion of elderly people. Taken together, these trends are beginning to undermine the assumptions on which European societies based their provision of welfare: not only with respect to the adequacy of the services themselves but, more radically, how these services will be financed. The question is simple: will the proportion of people active in the economy remain sufficient to support those who, for whatever reason, are not able to work? Add to this the marked prolongation of education that is part and parcel of a post-industrial economy and the implications are clear. No longer is it possible for most European societies to meet the obligation of welfare as these were understood in the immediate post-war period.

A noticeable change in political philosophy – a rowing back from the notion that the state is responsible for the provision of welfare from the cradle to the grave – is one reaction to these shifts. As ever, European societies have set about this in different ways, the most striking of which occurred in Britain in the 1980s. As we saw in Chapter 7, the Thatcher government not only instigated radical reforms, it developed an ideology to legitimate such changes. The debate, however, is not only ideological. If the state is no longer able, or even willing, to provide a comprehensive system of welfare for its citizens, who is to be responsible for this task? It is clear that the churches, amongst others, have a role to play in these changes.

Observations from the WREP project reveal an interesting theme: that the factors which were present when the initial differentiation of responsibilities took place are still in place as the new situation begins to emerge. Or to put the same point in a different way, the process of de-differentiation is as culturally specific as its predecessor. Hence the possibility of a relatively easy resumption of the welfare role on the part of the churches in some parts of Europe, and a much more difficult one in others. Three examples will suffice. In Italy or Greece, a very incomplete separation of powers in the first place has meant that the line between state and church remains essentially fluid. It can move back and forth as the situation demands. In France, in contrast, the secular state remains firmly in control, so much so that the researcher engaged on the

French case had difficulty persuading the public authorities to co-operate at all in a project that paid attention to religion. In Finland, finally, the very particular conditions of the recession in the early 1990s, as the Russian market collapsed, have led not only to a noticeable increase in the welfare roles undertaken by the churches but to an increase in their popularity as a result.

Considerably more could be said with respect both to this project and to its successor, which extended the work in two ways: first, to the minority religions of Europe, paying particular attention to the Muslim population; and second, to the selected countries in the formerly communist parts of Europe where the positions of state and church are necessarily different.<sup>7</sup> Both are central to the debates about inclusion and exclusion that are current in European life.

### **health, healthcare and the visibility of the sacred in modern societies**

Welfare, however, is not the only example of differentiation and de-differentiation. The same is true in health and healthcare, where the residues of history are equally present. Originally religious foundations – St Bartholomew’s and St Thomas’s in London, for example – have become in the twentieth century centres of cutting-edge medicine, funded primarily by state. The debate about health and healthcare will be approached, however, from a different perspective, taking as a starting point the moments of human existence when the sacred is at its most visible: birth and death. The understandings of modernity set out in Chapter 5 form a background to these discussions.

Childbirth was a dangerous process in pre-modern societies and remains so in much of the developing world. In Europe, the evidence can be found in almost every churchyard or parish register, which display in a strikingly visible form the fact that tens of thousands of young women lost their lives when giving birth to children.<sup>8</sup> So much so that preparation for birth for many women implied preparation for their own death. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the process was surrounded as much by religious ritual as it was by medical knowledge. The religious rite commonly known as the ‘Churching of Women’ offers a poignant illustration of this fact, in which the giving of thanks for safe deliverance from ‘the great pain and peril of Child-birth’ is the dominant theme.<sup>9</sup> Safe deliverance could not be taken for granted. The development of modern medical techniques – notably the combination of antibiotics and safe surgery – has transformed this situation. Here, if

nowhere else, can be seen the ‘modern’ solution: the application of scientific knowledge to a problem of human existence, and with great effect. In the West at least, the death of a mother in childbirth is now so rare as to be a deeply shocking event. This revolution in the lives of women is entirely welcome; few would relish a return to the sufferings of previous generations.

That is one version of the story. The second is more ambiguous and centres on the progressive loss of control on the part of the woman herself (or indeed women more generally), who complain that the experience of giving birth is little different from the assembly line found in a Fordist factory. Hence the reaction, the ‘postmodern’ response, in which women – mostly middle-class women, it must be said – regain their control, asking to give birth at home rather than in hospital, and insisting that both themselves and their babies be at the centre of the event, rather than the routines of the hospital or the requirements of the medical profession. Such re-appraisals have become an important body of literature in their own right in which comparative research plays an interesting role (Moscucci, 1990; Marland and Rafferty, 1997; Marland, 2004).

A searching set of questions lie beneath these shifts: how in late modernity should the moment of birth be understood and who or which agency is to decide? Is this a medical, administrative, moral or deeply personal – some would say sacred – event? Or all of these? Interestingly, exactly the same questions are revealed in the debates surrounding abortion in the United States.<sup>10</sup> No-one can deny the significance of this issue both for the American political class and for the various lobbies that put pressure on the decision-making process – not least the New Christian Right. Senior appointments (e.g. to the United States Supreme Court) are frequently reduced to this question.<sup>11</sup> Even more immediate from a sociological point of view is the gradual re-location of the abortion debate in American understanding, from an issue that was primarily one of justice for all women regardless of their socio-economic status (in the 1970s), to one that has become a central plank of the ‘right to life’ movement. That in turn reflects the changes which have taken place in American society as a whole. To an increasing extent, moral rather than socio-economic issues have come to dominate the agenda. Why is an interesting, and somewhat perplexing, question.

A further example of these shifts can be found in the sad story of Terri Schiavo – an episode that continued for more than a decade.<sup>12</sup> In February 1990, Schiavo suffered a cardiac arrest at the age of 26, which led to irreversible brain damage, following which she required constant care – first in a rehabilitation centre and then in a nursing home. In 1998, her

husband petitioned the courts for the first time, asking that the feeding tube be removed on the grounds that his wife was in a persistent vegetative state. The sequence of events that followed was both long and complex as different family members disagreed about what should or should not be done, as the case moved from court to court, and as senior political figures not only took an interest in the case but became actively involved. The decision-making process reached a climax in March 2005 (i.e. a full 15 years after the cardiac arrest) when the legal options open to Schiavo's parents to obstruct the process were finally exhausted; the feeding tube was removed for the third and last time – leading to her death a few days later.

So much for the case itself. Equally arresting is the extent to which it became a focal point of the media and a touchstone for political debate. In the later stages of the story, for example, the Bush Administration intervened repeatedly, not least in an attempt to change the federal court ruling by a 'private bill' applying to the Schiavo case. President Bush flew to Washington from Texas on Palm Sunday expressly to sign the bill. Church groups became equally involved, demanding that Schiavo be granted the 'right to life'. The vocabulary employed becomes increasingly emotive, reflecting the religious as well as moral aspects of the case. Churches held 'vigils' and Schiavo became a 'martyr' – themes picked up in the media and played and re-played on television. Boundaries were crossed and re-crossed repeatedly as political, religious and moral issues became increasingly intertwined, not to mention the evident confusions of the private and public sphere.

The whole episode, in fact, flies in the face of institutional separation, whether this is understood in terms of the separation of powers in the United States (bearing in mind that the attempts to overrule the court eventually failed), or more generally of the institutional specializations associated with modernization – themselves a central theme of the sociological canon. In assessing this material, moreover, one point needs very firm underlining. That is, to remember that the Schiavo case is simply an American, unusually public and very litigious version of a much larger issue: how late-modern societies come to terms with the difficult moral questions that are increasingly posed as medical techniques permit the continuation of physical life after the brain has ceased to function, or equally the sustaining of a premature baby in one room of a hospital while in another a late abortion is taking place. The cover of the issue of *Time* devoted to the Schiavo case says it all: 'The End of Life. Who decides?'<sup>13</sup> Who indeed? The question will be re-opened in the final section of this chapter.



### from welfare to well-being

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So much for de-differentiation in terms of institutions – the same is true with respect to individuals. At this point, moreover, there is an obvious link with the material on the new age and self-spirituality introduced in Chapter 8, bearing in mind (following Heelas) that there are generational shifts in this field just as there are in mainstream religions (pp. 168–9). In the last of these generations (our own) can be found what Heelas terms the ‘well-being spirituality’ of modern consumer culture. Well-being becomes increasingly a lifestyle choice as people shop for the goods and services that they feel will be beneficial to body, mind *and* spirit. Health foods, beauty products, organic produce of all kinds, spa treatments, holidays, alternative remedies, self-help manuals, counsellors, classes and such like have become part of our everyday lives – easily available in either the well-stocked supermarket or book shop or their online equivalents. This is a rapidly expanding field. What might be termed the ‘de-differentiation of the person’ is part and parcel of these shifts. No longer is the emphasis on the separation of spheres, home and work, body and mind, mind and spirit and so on. The crucial point lies in the development of the *whole* person.

Hence the seeking of a healer rather than, or as well as, a medical practitioner. The insertion of ‘as well as’ is significant in this respect. Here, as elsewhere, boundaries are softening as increasing numbers of alternative practices are both recognized by the medical profession and paid for by private insurance. Healing, moreover, merges into therapy, undertaken in order that we may be more effective citizens or (more sharply) more effective capitalists – as our energies are directed towards economic as well as spiritual goals. What, in fact, is the difference in a world where the market invades the spiritual and the spiritual invades the market (Woodhead, 2012)? Spiritual goods can be bought and sold like any others. One point remains clear, however: women are considerably more involved in this enterprise than men (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004; Harvey and Vincett, 2012). In this respect at least, the search for well-being is very similar to more conventional forms of religious life – a point that must be examined in more detail.

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### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER

One caveat is important before embarking on this discussion. What follows applies only to the Christian West, not to the other faith communities

now present in both Europe and America, nor to the parts of the world dominated by different religious traditions. This is not to say that gender differences are not important for a proper understanding of these populations. They are. They take, however, significantly different forms, the understanding of which requires both theological and sociological insight that go beyond this chapter.

In terms of the Christian West, the difference between men and women with respect to their religious lives is one of the most pervasive findings in the literature. It is true of practice, of belief, of self-identification, of private prayer and so on, and can be found in almost every denomination – large or small, traditional or innovative, Catholic or Protestant. Early reviews of this literature can be found in Francis (1997) and Walter and Davie (1998); more recent summaries are contained in Woolever et al. (2006) and Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012). All of these include extensive references to the available data. Indeed the significance of gender is a point on which almost every commentator agrees, whether their approach be quantitative (the hardest of hard statistics) or qualitative (the most impressionistic of religious sources). It is equally true for those forms of religion which appear on first reading to be hostile in many respects to the welfare of women. It was precisely this point, for example, that Bernice Martin was exploring with respect to the position of women in the Pentecostal communities of Latin America. It is also discovered in communities that would properly be described as ‘fundamentalist’.

Two questions immediately present themselves: why is this so and – equally important – why was the question ignored for so long? For such it was, a fact that becomes increasingly difficult for students to grasp given the preoccupations of those currently engaged in the field. Here, in fact, is a timely and very positive example of the discipline catching up with reality. But why did it take so long? There are two rather different reasons for the delay: the first can be found in the churches themselves, the second in the limitations of sociology as a discipline. Within the churches – or more precisely within significant sections of the Protestant churches – a major debate about leadership took place in the second half of the twentieth century. Central to this debate was the possibility, or otherwise, that women should become ordained priests or ministers, assuming thereby the full responsibilities of leadership. The debate itself is interesting, but is not the primary point in this chapter.<sup>14</sup> This lies in the fact that a strong focus on leadership led to a relative lack of attention regarding the place of women in the pews of not only the Protestant churches themselves but of the much larger Catholic constituency which (like the Orthodox) remains immune to the possibility of change regarding the priesthood.

Only gradually did the pendulum begin to swing revealing disproportionate numbers of women among the faithful in practically all Christian churches in the West, not only now but in the past. Historians just as much as sociologists began to adjust their spectacles.

The second reason for the delay can be found in the point already noted in Bernice Martin's discussion of Pentecostalism. Here the responsibility lies squarely in the theoretical frameworks of the discipline, notably the concept of patriarchy. More precisely, on some readings of the sociological agenda, women of all people should be leaving the churches, given that it is the teaching of these 'patriarchal' institutions that has not only disadvantaged the women who have remained within the fold, but – much more insidiously – has legitimated their subordination throughout society. Women even more than men, it follows, should be anxious to jump ship. Awkwardly for the protagonists of these theories, the data suggested something different – that the women might be leaving but the men were leaving faster still. Not only was there a persistent gender imbalance in the Christian churches, it was getting larger rather than smaller (Brierley, 1991). In the short term, however, it was easier to ignore the topic than to rethink the theories that would be immediately vulnerable if the issue was tackled head on.

Happily the data triumphed. So much so that the number of articles addressing the question of *why* women are or appear to be more religious than men grows year on year – articles which engage the issue in a variety of ways. A relatively early marshalling of these explanations can be found in Walter and Davie (1998). Essentially these can be divided into two groups: those that explain the differences between the religious behaviour of men and women in terms of 'nature' and those that favour explanations based on 'nurture'; that is, on the different roles that men and women perform in society and, it follows, the different patterns of socialization associated with these roles. Is it the case, in other words, that women are more religious than men because of what they are, or because of what they do?

Important implications follow. They can be found first in the possibility that women are, or think themselves, to be more vulnerable than men – whether economically, socially or physically. Religion, it follows, is a compensator, an answer to a problem that in some respects at least is specific to women. The logic of the argument demands, however, a supplementary question. Is the position of women changing in modern societies and in ways that overcome these difficulties or do they – despite everything – endure? One aspect of this debate is frequently referenced in the literature (De Vaus, 1984; De Vaus and McAllister, 1987; Becker and Hofmeister, 2001) and concerns the increasing tendency

for women to participate in the labour force on an equal footing with men, a fact that not only reduces their economic dependence but at the same time distracts women from their domestic responsibilities – and within this, their primary role as the bearers and carers of children. It is the latter tasks, moreover, that are most closely associated with stronger indices of religious activity. They also relate to vulnerability in a much more physical sense, a discussion which draws directly on the material on childbirth set out in the previous section. Women – for most of human history – were acutely vulnerable every time that they gave birth, a situation that has transformed only very recently. Hence the complexities of the issues. A whole series of *interrelated* factors need to be kept in mind in assessing the religiousness of women: their distinctive role in childbearing, the ways in which this has changed in recent decades, new opportunities in the labour force and the re-ordering of women's lives in consequence – not to mention the families of which they are part.

Broadly speaking, two ways of thinking emerge in the sociological responses to these questions. The first argues that the roles of women have changed very significantly in the twentieth century, leading to a corresponding reduction in their need for religion – a conclusion favoured very largely by secularization theorists. Callum Brown (2000) exemplifies this point of view. Brown, in fact, rests his entire account of *The Death of Christian Britain* on the transformation of gender roles that took place in the 1960s. Not only have women ceased to be noticeably more religious than men, they have ceased dramatically to fulfil their traditional function of handing on the faith to the next generation – hence, from the point of view of the churches, the extreme seriousness of this situation. There are others, however, who take a different view, arguing that something much more profound is at stake in the religiousness of men and women than has been indicated so far. A differential need for religion is embedded in the nature and personalities of male and female and is, therefore, unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, if at all. Interestingly, the rational choice theorists are at least hinting that this might be the case in so far as they rest their argument on the fact that women are more risk averse than men (Miller and Stark, 2002; Stark, 2002). It is the risk-taking aptitudes of men that permit them, relatively speaking, to live without religion – or, in terms of RCT, to make different 'rational' choices.

It is unwise, in my view, to dichotomize these choices: this is a both/and rather than an either/or situation. Societies, moreover, continue to evolve. It is true that childbearing has become not only safer but more efficient in the Western world: relatively few years are now spent in

pregnancy and childrearing, leaving more time for employment within a life-span that is getting longer rather than shorter. But precisely this (a marked increase in longevity) is creating new burdens for women as they become, or more accurately remain, the primary carers of elderly people, whether in the home or in an institution (a major finding of the WREP study). It echoes, in fact, a point made by Walter and Davie (1998: 654) at an earlier stage: namely that it is important to look at the *nature* of women's employment as well as the fact that increasing numbers of women are now engaged in the labour force. One very obvious example can be found in the disproportionate numbers of women in the relatively low-paid service sector, in which the care of the very young and the very old remains a noticeable and persistent feature.

With this in mind, a number of ideas that have been introduced in this chapter can be brought together. The first reflects the presence of women in the caring professions, however these are organized. The second concerns the continuing visibility of the sacred in modern societies, noting in particular the difficult decisions that relate to the beginning and end of life. The third reflects the marked differences between men and women in terms of their religious lives, whether the forms of religion are traditional or rather less so. Hence a somewhat tentative conclusion: is it possible that these factors are related to each other? Might it be the case, in other words, that one reason for the disproportionate religiousness of men and women lies in the fact that women are closer, both physically and emotionally, to the sacred than men – in so far as the sacred is exposed in late modernity, just as it was in earlier forms of society, at the most critical moments of the life-cycle: birth and death?

It is hard to dispute that this is so in terms of the former – it is, after all, women who give birth. Here the argument stands or falls on the capacities of modern medicine to eliminate the sacred in what might be termed the progressive 'routinization' of childbirth. This elimination is, at best, partial; indeed the non-medical nature of childbirth, if not the sacred as such, is being steadily reclaimed in late modern, de-differentiated societies.<sup>15</sup> In terms of death, the situation is a little different and will be discussed in more detail in the final paragraphs of this chapter. At this stage it is sufficient to note that the medicalization of death is as much part of the modernization process as the medicalization of birth, but it is still the case that those who care for, and sit with, the dying are more likely to be women than men, even if they are paid to do this – a situation reinforced by the fact that women live longer than men, a consequence in itself of the transformation in childbirth already described. These factors become cumulative.

One further contribution to the literature on gender is worth noting before closing this discussion. It can be found in Woodhead's short but very careful analyses of the contrasting ways in which different groups of women engage with religion in different parts of the world (Woodhead, 2000, 2001). Rejecting the possibility that religion is necessarily a 'good' or a 'bad' thing for women, Woodhead emphasizes the fact that women, just like men, are very diverse, as indeed are the societies of which they are part. With this in mind, she looks first at the societies of the modern West, noting in particular the distinction between the private and the public sphere. Broadly speaking, women who remain in the private sphere (in the home) find it easier to affirm their religiousness than those who straddle both public and private. Such a conclusion echoes the labour-force argument cited above, but is, possibly, less persuasive in late or postmodern societies than it was in the mid-post-war decades, in so far as these are societies in which de-differentiation is increasingly present. This is certainly true in terms of the labour market. It may also be true in terms of religion. Here Woodhead's argument quite clearly reflects the dominant theme of this chapter; it also evokes the emphasis on holistic spirituality found in the Kendal project (bearing in mind that the project postdates the chapters on 'Women and religion'). Interestingly, it is older women who are disproportionately found in the 'spiritual' domain, just as they are in more traditional forms of religion.

In the less developed parts of the world, following Woodhead, the process of differentiation is, and always has been, less marked. Here women have found both in religious teaching and in religious organizations a space to develop their talents, in public as well as in private life. Religion becomes a resource, a way forward – a way to curb the excesses of their menfolk, and to develop the habits that are necessary for stability or even modest improvement in parts of the world where welfare in any developed sense is lacking (an argument that draws on the work of both David and Bernice Martin). Hence Woodhead's conclusion: no one should doubt the importance of gender to the sociological study of religion. Nor, as both Woodhead and Bernice Martin affirm, is it enough for sociology simply to take note of the differences between men and women in terms of religion and to embed these distinctions into existing bodies of theory. The theories as such must evolve in order to include the many, varied and subtle ways in which men and women, themselves very diverse, both shape and are shaped by the religious dimensions of the societies of which they are part. The chapters brought together by Aune et al. (2008) constitute an excellent starting point for this discussion.

## AGE AND THE LIFE-CYCLE

The reluctance of sociologists to engage the question of gender in relation to religion has been discussed in some detail. The question of age is rather different, given that the inclusion of 'age' as a sociological category came relatively late into almost every aspect of the discipline. This was a shift driven by the demographic changes that were taking place in industrial societies in the late twentieth century and their likely impact on existing societal structures. The issue has already been addressed in relation to welfare.

Once 'age' is included in the analyses of religious data, however, distinctive and in many ways predictable patterns begin to emerge (Davie and Vincent, 1999; Davie, 2000a). Older people are more religious than the young on all the conventional indicators, a fact that interacts with the differences in gender already observed to produce a preponderance of older women in almost every denomination or congregation both in Europe and the United States. In this sense the analyses of social science simply reinforce a stereotype – one, moreover, which is frequently regarded as a 'problem'. So much so that institutions which perform admirably on important indices of inclusion or widening participation are regarded as failures in many Western societies.

How, though, should these marked differences in age be understood? Once again there are two possibilities: on the one hand, there are explanations that relate to the life-cycle, and on the other, there are those that reflect the notion of the generation or cohort. The first is straightforward enough: it rests on the premise that the closer an individual comes to death, the greater the concern with matters of mortality and therefore with the issues that, in most societies, come under the rubric of religion. The second is rather different and underlines the markedly different outlooks of the age-cohorts or generations which are found in any society. In Europe, an obvious example can be found in the generations born before or after the Second World War. More recently, the epithets 'baby boomers' and 'generations X and Y' pervade both popular parlance and social science, not to mention the more economically driven world of marketing.

Generations, moreover, are as different in their religious lives as they are in everything else – an argument that lies at the heart of Callum Brown's analysis (see above). His work is very largely based on the *generation* of women that came of age in the 1960s and their reluctance to engage with religion in the same way as their mothers or grandmothers. If Brown is right, the present preponderance of older women in the

churches will be a temporary rather than permanent feature. The present 'cohort' is unlikely to be replaced.

This, however, is not the whole story. Quite apart from the generational shifts and life-cycle changes, there is a third factor to take into account: an awareness that the life-cycle itself is changing and in ways that have important implications for religion. Three of these will be dealt with here, in a discussion that builds on to the material presented in *Religion in Modern Europe* (Davie, 2000a).<sup>16</sup> The first concerns the sharp decline in infant mortality that has taken place in all modern societies; the second engages the notion of adolescence and its marked prolongation in late modernity; and the third opens the discussion of old age itself and the ways in which this is understood by modern people – in so doing it forms a bridge to the final section of this chapter. These are not exhaustive discussions; they should be seen rather as indicative of the questions that need to be asked, and in many respects of the sociological work that needs to be done, in this clearly expanding field.

The decline in infant mortality is an index of modernization in itself. As such it is closely related to the transformation of childbirth already discussed – the evidence from churchyards or parish registers is equally persuasive in either case. The particular combinations of improved economic conditions and medical advance that brought these changes about are crucially important in historical terms. They lie, however, beyond the scope of this chapter, which will focus on a specific but very revealing issue: that is, the implications of these changes for the understanding of baptism – the rite of passage associated in almost all of Europe with the birth of a new child. Indeed for many centuries, Europe's historic churches were effectively the registrars of birth and death. This is no longer so – a change brought about for many different reasons. Among them can be found the following: first, the process of institutional separation that has produced a professional class trained to deal with the registration of citizens at various points in their lives; second, the mutation in the religious life of European societies described in Chapter 7 (best described as a shift from contracting-out to contracting-in); and third, a marked change in the 'status' of the newborn child (an infant who is almost certain to live to maturity is less in need of divine blessing in either the short or the longer term). Taken together, these factors have transformed the rite of baptism in the course of twentieth century – a point with considerable implications for both sociological and theological study, not least for comparative work.

It is here, in fact, that many of the themes of the previous chapters converge, both methodological and substantive. In terms of the former,



for example, it is simply not possible to compare baptism figures across time (more precisely across different generations) without an awareness that you might not be comparing like with like – a point underlined by Bernice Martin in her trenchant critique of social scientific methodology (Martin, 2003).<sup>17</sup> Here too can be found the ‘angle of eschatological tension’ evoked by David Martin in his discussion of the relationship between sociology and theology (p. 132). Liturgies alter to fit new situations; theologies follow suit. But here, thirdly, can be found noticeable and persistent differences between neighbouring European societies: the Church of England, for example, has seen a dramatic decline in its figures for baptism; so too has its Catholic equivalent in France;<sup>18</sup> not so the Lutheran churches of Northern Europe. The rates of baptism in the Nordic churches remain extraordinarily high *for specifically Nordic reasons* – exactly the same reasons, in fact, that encourage Nordic people to pay substantial amounts of tax to their churches despite the fact that they rarely attend. Membership of the national church, denoted by baptism, remains despite everything a central plank of Nordic identity.

Relatively speaking, this is also the case with confirmation, a rite traditionally associated with adolescence. But adolescence itself has changed. No longer is it a relatively brief period of transition between childhood and becoming an adult, marked for a man by getting a job and for a woman by a move from her father’s household to that of her husband. It has become instead a prolonged period for both men and women, associated (at least for some) with an extended period of education, a somewhat piecemeal entry into the labour market, and a marked tendency to delay marriage and childbearing until a much later stage (chronologically speaking). Almost everything, in fact, is different, including attitudes to religion. What at one stage was a brief and somewhat rebellious transition is now almost a way of life. At this point, however, it is important to recall the recent findings of the European Values Study (pp. 99–100). It is true that younger generations are less religious than the old in terms of the more conventional religious indicators. Conversely, today’s adolescents are those most likely to experiment with new forms of religion – this, in other words, is the generation most attracted to the idea of an immanent God (a God in me) and to the conviction that there is some sort of ‘life after death’. As we have seen, this is most evident in the parts of Europe where the historic churches are relatively weak: that is, when conventional forms of religious transmission are much less likely to take place (Fulton et al., 2000).<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the case, the notion of ‘life after death’ is somewhat remote for today’s adolescents, given the increase in longevity in the developed

world – a fact of considerable significance for the churches. The issues, moreover, can be looked at from a variety of perspectives. The first is entirely positive: religious organizations cope well with older people and are expected to do so (a conclusion firmly endorsed by the WREP study and likely to continue for the foreseeable, if not indefinite, future). Indeed for significant sections of the elderly population – most notably women and those who live in rural areas – the churches constitute the *only* effective network. Rather more complex, however, are the implications of ageing for the economic lives of religious institutions. They, just like their secular counterparts, are financially stretched by the need to pay pensions for an extended period, a point discussed in Davie (2000a). Once again different situations are revealed in different countries – financial arrangements, including pension schemes, become a sensitive indicator of the place of the church in any given society. Financial strain, however, lies behind the increasing use of volunteers in many, if not all, European societies – bearing in mind that volunteers are themselves a mutating species. No longer primarily married women, they have become instead an army of ‘early retired’.

It is in this context, finally, that we should place the bodies of empirical material that relate to religion and the elderly, in all senses of the term. Two ways of working come particularly to mind. First, there is a series of studies that seek to establish a link between religious activity (variously defined) and longer living (see, for example, Levin, 1994 and Koenig et al., 1996). The links may be direct or indirect – in the sense that religious commitment (prayer, Bible reading, fellowship and so on) may be good in themselves, but at the same time they encourage lifestyles that are conducive to good health.<sup>20</sup> The second group of studies is exemplified in the excellent work undertaken by Williams (1990) in Aberdeen. Now some 20 years old, this has become a classic in the literature. Williams considers a generation of Aberdonians brought up in a strongly Protestant tradition, examining the link between personal biography, including its religious elements, and the ways in which his subjects deal with illness and death. Three things become clear in this study: first, that this is a ‘generation’ unlikely to be repeated; second, the Protestant tradition is but one element in the overall picture – work and wealth are equally significant; and third, that this tradition is more significant for some of Williams’s respondents than it is for others. Indeed the picture that emerges is both subtle and complex: not only do the respondents in this painstaking enquiry have very different understandings of what it means to be religious, they make use of the resources that religion offers them in contrasting ways.

## DEATH AND THE STUDY OF DEATH

In September 2005, the University of Bath established a Centre for Death and Society in its Department of Social and Policy Sciences.<sup>21</sup> The Centre has four aims: to further social, policy and health research; to provide education and training for academics and practitioners; to enhance social policy understanding; and to encourage community development. Here, in other words, is a Centre firmly committed to interdisciplinarity (de-differentiation) not only in relation to the academic work carried out in this field, but to the practical applications of this. De-differentiation, moreover, was well exemplified in the conference that inaugurated the new venture.<sup>22</sup>

An obvious example can be found in the plenary session of the conference devoted to the hospice movement (Hartley, 2005). The story itself is well known: the hospice movement grew out of a dissatisfaction with medical provision, where in the early post-war period dying was seen more as a failure of modern medical techniques than as the natural end of life. Interestingly, the early promoters of the movement were almost all women (notably Cicely Saunders and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross). Hartley's plenary address, however, underlines not so much the early history of hospice care as the renewed emphasis on partnership with the National Health Service – increasingly the care of the dying is being taken back into the mainstream. This is interesting in two respects: first, that institutional separations (of whatever kind) reflect a particular stage in a process – they are not necessarily the final goal; and second, that initiatives which begin by splitting off from the mainstream can in the course of time return, bringing with them new-found skills and insights. In terms of the hospice movement, one such insight is clearly the importance of caring for the dying person, not simply the alleviation of symptoms. Such care is multi-faceted and includes body, mind and spirit, bearing in mind that the latter may present in a wide variety of forms.

The creation of an interdisciplinary and specialist Centre for Death and Society marks in a very visible way the emergence of a new sub-discipline, one which brings together the contributions of scholars from many different fields: medicine, history, sociology, psychology, social policy, counselling, religious studies and so on (the full list would be a long one). But quite apart from this very welcome collaborative activity, there has been a noticeable revival of *sociological* interest in 'death, dying and disposal' over the last two decades, a period in which the subject itself has re-emerged into public consciousness.<sup>23</sup> This re-emergence

is, in fact, part of the story, which has caught the attention of mainstream sociologists as much as those interested in religion – notably those who engage with the nature of modernity (Bauman, 1989; Giddens, 1991). In this necessarily selective account, two themes exemplify the implications for religion: first, the reflections of Walter concerning the pre-modern, modern and postmodern ways of death; and second, the evidence that the study of death brings to the vexed question of secularization. Both ideas resonate strongly with the broader themes of this book.

Walter's seminal work in this field (1990, 1994 and 1995) relates directly to the discussion of modernity in Chapter 5. In *The Revival of Death*, for example, Walter traces the evolution of death and death practices in different societal forms, noting in each case the key authority that deals with these questions and the body of knowledge that frames the discourse. In pre-modern societies, authority lay with the church (sometimes one, sometimes more than one), whose personnel supported their claims by reference to religious texts. In modern societies, there is a marked shift towards the medical or scientific, both organizationally and in terms of discourse. The medical and scientific, however, have repeatedly been called into question – a by now familiar point. Increasingly they are seen as a necessary and in many ways beneficial aspect of modern societies, but not a *sufficient* one – particularly when it comes to the difficult moral questions surrounding the beginning and end of life. As Walter argues, the only authority that counts in these circumstances is the self, who must decide how he or she wishes to die and the particular nature of the support required. That, however, is a lonely position, the more so in societies in which the body and its maintenance have become ever more important notions. Hence the huge variety of practices and personnel that have emerged in the Western world to engage these issues.

Are these changes evidence of secularization or are they not? It is true that the Christian churches have lost their monopoly of death and death practices in most Western societies? They remain, however, key players – not least for the sections in the population who rarely attend them. To withdraw the services of the church at the moment of death would cause considerable offence to the great majority of European citizens. For some, it is true, a secular funeral has become an attractive option, though not yet for that many (uptake is limited, though more likely to grow than to recede). A much more popular solution lies in the gradual evolution of the religious ceremony, which increasingly contains elements that are specific to the individual who has died but which lie outside the religious tradition that takes responsibility for the ceremony.

Once again an excellent example can be found in the ceremonies that took place following the death of Princess Diana, a point of reference for funerals in the following decade.

Hence the connection between this chapter and the notion of vicarious religion (pp. 143–6) in which the reactions of a society to collective or unexpected deaths played an important role. Such reactions support an increasingly evident fact: namely that there are effectively two economies in the traditional churches of modern Europe. The first of these concerns birth and baptism and is changing moderately fast, though more in some places than in others; here is the model of choice. The second relates to death and the role of the churches within this, which is noticeably more resilient; it reflects the persistence of vicarious religion. An informed discussion of the secularization process must take both, and the inevitable tensions between them, firmly into account. Such is not always the case.

## NOTES

1 Details of the Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective project can be found at [www.crs.uu.se/Research/Former\\_projects/WREP/?languageId=1](http://www.crs.uu.se/Research/Former_projects/WREP/?languageId=1) (accessed 23 April 2012). See also Bäckström and Davie (2010), Bäckström et al. (2011) and Davie (2012). This is a European story. There is not space in this chapter to develop the American equivalent; it is admirably told in Cnaan (2002).

2 Rather more recently, scholars have come to realize that religion, in both its form and content, is an independent variable in this process. Manow (2004), for example, both examines and refines Esping-Andersen's typology.

3 To all intents and purposes the Lutheran Church became itself a department of state – a public utility financed through the tax system.

4 Multiple definitions of subsidiarity exist, all of which articulate the key principle, i.e. that in the European Union decisions of all kinds should be taken as closely as possible to the citizen. The term as such finds its origins in Catholic social teaching.

5 'Voluntary' can be understood in two ways: as the voluntary (non-state) sector of the economy, and as voluntary (unpaid) work.

6 These were divided into three categories: those working for the churches; those working for the local authority or equivalent; and representatives of the general public.

7 WREP's successor is known as WaVE (Welfare and Values in Europe); the project was financed through the Framework 6 Programme of the European Commission. See [www.crs.uu.se/Research/Former\\_projects/WaVE/](http://www.crs.uu.se/Research/Former_projects/WaVE/) (accessed 23 April 2012).

8 Equally pertinent is the ambiguous presence of the step-mother in popular culture as the bereaved father re-married, often to provide a mother for his children. An historically informed account of this state of affairs, the numbers of deaths that occurred and the attempts to escape from it can be found in Loudon (1992, 2000).

9 See also its alternative title: 'The Thanksgiving of Women after Child-birth'. The text can be found in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and in almost all

subsequent revisions. There are, of course, alternative readings of this rite – those which relate to the need for ‘purification’ after childbirth. Hence the negative response of many feminists both to the rite itself and to what it signifies.

10 The section that follows owes a great deal to the knowledge and perceptions of an outstanding graduate class that I taught at Hartford Seminary in June 2005.

11 An excellent example can be found in the debates surrounding the nominations of John Roberts, Harriet Miers and Sam Alito to the Supreme Court in 2005. Miers subsequently withdrew; despite the support of President Bush, her views on the abortion question failed to satisfy the pro-life enthusiasts.

12 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terri\\_Schiavo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terri_Schiavo) (accessed 23 April 2012) for the various stages in this extremely complex case.

13 See *Time*, 4 April 2005, 165/14.

14 A clear account can be found in Dowell and Williams (1994).

15 It is important to remember that this is *not* a return to conventional religiousness; it is rather a moving on from the modernist position.

16 Especially Chapter 4.

17 A point of view challenged in turn by David Voas in his painstaking work on religious demography (see Voas, 2003a and 2003b).

18 Figures for baptism in the Church of England can be found on [www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats/research-statistics.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats/research-statistics.aspx) (accessed 23 April 2012).

19 Having said that, a recent study of young people in Britain found that ‘Generation Y’ (i.e. those born since 1982) were very largely indifferent to religion (Savage et al., 2006). In a substantial edited text, Collins-Mayo and Dandelion (2010) bring together a large amount of information concerning religion and youth.

20 See also the work of psychogerontologist Peter Coleman (2011).

21 See [www.bath.ac.uk/cdas/](http://www.bath.ac.uk/cdas/) (accessed 23 April 2012) for details of the Centre. The journal *Mortality* is closely associated with this venture.

22 See in addition the contents page of any issue of *Mortality*.

23 The press attention to the establishment of the new Centre was evidence in itself of this interest.