

Post-Christian Spirituality

Misconceptions, Obstacles, Prospects

Paul Tromp

Centre for Sociological Research

KU Leuven, Belgium

paul.tromp@kuleuven.be

Book chapter:

Houtman D and Tromp P (in press) Post-Christian Spirituality: Misconceptions, Obstacles, Prospects.
In: Ai AL, Wink P and Harris KA (eds) *Assessing Spirituality in a Diversified World*. New York: Springer.

Paul Tromp

KU Leuven



Dick Houtman

KU Leuven



PhD Article 1: Believing without Belonging in Twenty European Countries (1981-2008):
De-institutionalization of Christianity or Spiritualization of Religion?

PhD Article 2: Religious Decline or Religious Change?
Evidence from Thirteen Western-European Countries (1981-2008)

Paul Tromp

KU Leuven



Anna Kulkova

KU Leuven



Dick Houtman

KU Leuven



Religious Decline or Religious Change?

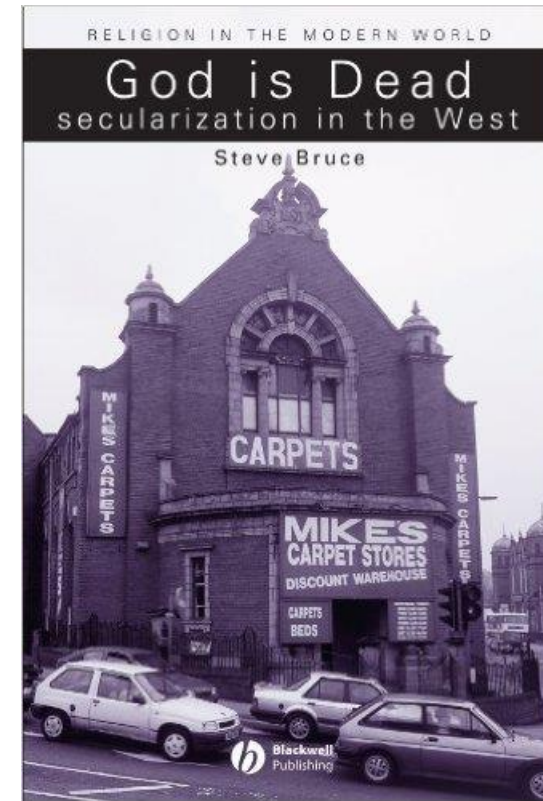
Secularization theory predicts ...

- ... a decline of the social significance of (Christian) religion.
- ... increasing numbers of people to become less and less religious.

This thesis of religious decline has become increasingly challenged by the claim that religion has not so much declined but rather transformed profoundly.

Critics rather observe change in the religious landscapes of Western-Europe.

The decline of Christianity's traditional institutional, doctrinal and ritual dimensions should not be mistaken for a decline of religion *tout court*.



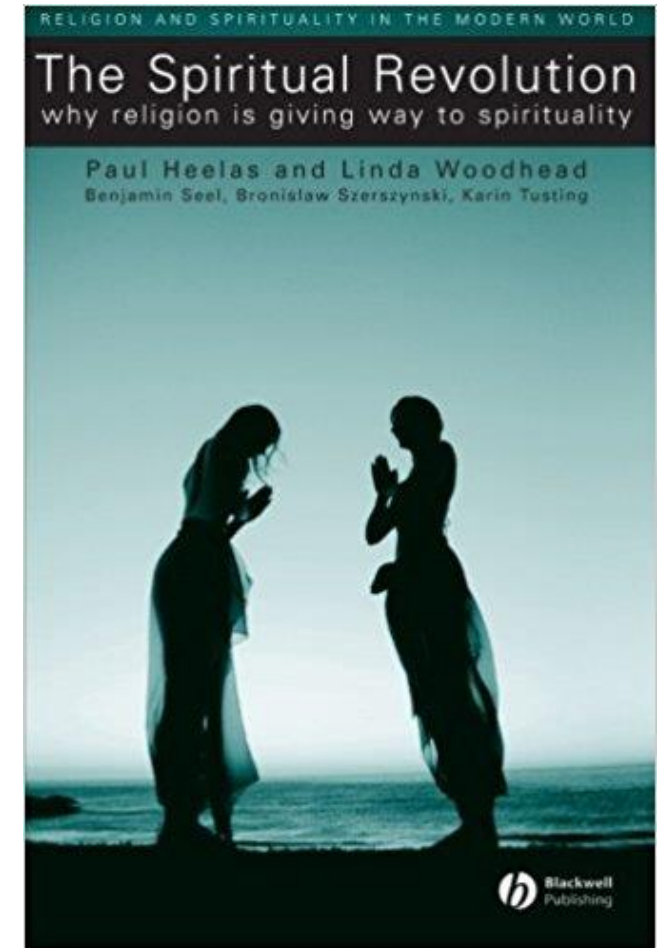
A Spiritual Turn in the West? (1/4)

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005: 3):

A ‘spiritual revolution’ may be unfolding:

‘life-as religion’ → ‘subjective-life spirituality’

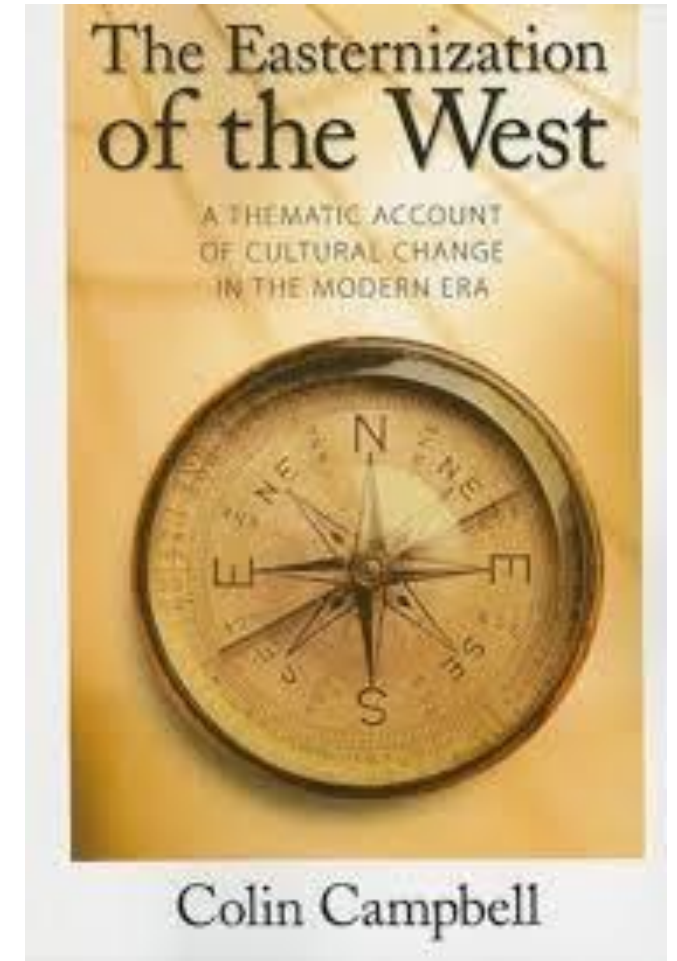
A “turn away from worlds in which people think of themselves first and foremost as belonging to established and ‘given’ orders of things which are transmitted from the past”.



A Spiritual Turn in the West? (2/4)

Colin Campbell (2007: 41): “a fundamental revolution in Western civilization, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment”. ← ‘Easternization of the West’

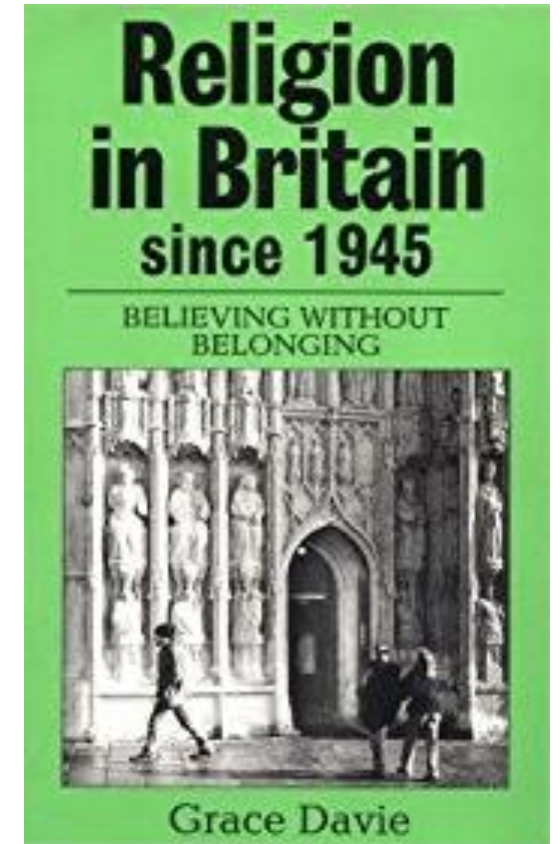
The religious worldview that has historically characterized the West (dualism) is increasingly being replaced by its Eastern counterpart (monism).



A Spiritual Turn in the West? (3/4)

Grace Davie (1994: 4-5) points out how in Britain and Western-Europe “feelings, experience and the more numinous aspects of religious belief demonstrate considerable persistence,” whereas “religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment display an undeniable degree of secularization”.

“The sacred does not disappear (...) in many ways it is becoming more rather than less prevalent in contemporary society.” (p. 43)



A Spiritual Turn in the West? (4/4)

Summarized: In the West, people turn away from traditional Christian religion towards post-Christian spirituality.

Next questions: What does post-Christian spirituality look like? Is it a coherent and unifying worldview, or too privatized, individualized, fragmented and diverse for that?

The literature actually conveys seven logically interrelated ideas that are central its worldview. They, in effect, assume, validate, and legitimate each other.

Perennialism (or Polymorphism) (1/7)

What religious traditions have in common is more important than what sets them apart.

All religious traditions ...

- ... refer deep down to one single identical and universal spiritual source.
- ... are equally valid because they ultimately all worship the same divine source ('there are many paths, but there is just one truth').
- ... are more flawed and misleading to the extent that they define themselves as different from, conflicting with, and superior to others.

Bricolage (or Syncretism) (2/7)

Perennialism incites bricolage:

For if all religions are deep down identical and interchangeable, one should, logically speaking, feel free to draw on different religions in a way that makes sense personally.

What matters is to prevent oneself from getting stuck to just one single religious tradition and starting to believe that it is superior to all others, because this would fly in the face of the doctrine of perennialism.

Misconception: bricolage proves the non-existence of a unifying spiritual worldview.

Diffuseness and immanence of the sacred (3/7)

Alternative Eastern ontology of the sacred:

A diffuse impersonal spirit, life force or energy that is – and always has been – present in the world and the cosmos (immanent).

Traditional Western ontology of the sacred:

A personal God who has created the world and therefore precedes the latter rather than being part of it, and resides therefore in a separate realm of its own (transcendent).

Holism (4/7)

Invisible unity exists at a deeper level because the omnipresent, immanent and diffuse spirit, life force, or source of energy connects and unifies everything.

This idea differs profoundly from the dualistic and disenchanting orthodox religious traditions for which the divine is radically transcendent, and for which the world is purged of the sacred and hence no more than a soulless thing without any room left for magic or mystery (e.g. Calvinistic Protestantism and Salafistic Islam).

Aliveness of the cosmos (5/7)

Understanding the sacred as an omnipresent, immanent and diffuse spirit, energy, or life force not only underlies the notion that everything is connected and unified, it also robs the world of its status as a mere soulless and inanimate thing.

Holism and the diffuseness and immanence of the sacred incite an understanding of the cosmos as being alive and in effect in a continuous state of change and evolution.

Self-spirituality (6/7)

Due to its omnipresence, the sacred can also be found within as a sort of natural or spiritual self that lies hidden underneath the mundane or conventional self.

In the deepest layers of one's own consciousness, the divine spark is smoldering, waiting to be reconnected with and to succeed the socialized self.

“The inner realm [...] serve[s] as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life” (Heelas, 1996: 19).

Self-spirituality (6/7)

Spiritual path to salvation: liberating oneself from the entrapments of the false self, i.e. what society wants one to be, but that should not be mistaken for who one really or at deepest is, who one is by nature. Instead, one should:

- Listen to one's inner voice: one's personal feelings, intuitions, and emotions, understood here as emanations of a spiritual self that needs to be taken seriously because it defines who one really is.
- Relativize the authoritative status of external sources of authority (e.g. holy texts and religious elites).

Experiential epistemology (7/7)

A conception of the sacred as a diffuse and immanent impersonal spirit, life force or energy that is omnipresent also informs an epistemology of personal experience.

Truth is not a matter of belief, but results from inner knowing (gnosis).

“Truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or ‘enlightenment’.

Truth can only be personally experienced” (Hanegraaff, 1996: 519).

Personal feelings and intuitions are thus very important in the pursuit of spiritual truth.

A coherent spiritual worldview

Individualism is collectively embraced and constitutes a dogma of non-conformity.

Take personal feelings seriously and embark on strictly personal spiritual quests.

Bricolage is encouraged and results in diversity & fragmentation of the spiritual milieu.

This worldview incites, brings forth, & accounts for bricolage, diversity & fragmentation.

“The diversity of the spiritual milieu results from rather than contradicts the existence of a coherent doctrine of being and well-being” (Aupers & Houtman, 2006: 206).

Prospects

Call to include a post-Christian spirituality scale in today's long-standing (inter)national survey programs to complement scales for the measurement of traditional Christian religiosity. This is vital for testing contemporary theories of religious change in the West.

The risk of not including such a scale is that we can only record the dissolution of the Christian religious formations of the past without mapping the newly emerging ones. Research findings may in turn be biased towards religious decline rather than change.

Post-Christian Spirituality

1. Perennialism: deep down, all religions are identical and interchangeable
2. Bricolage: need to feel free to draw on different religions in a way that makes sense personally
3. Diffuseness and immanence of the sacred: the sacred is present in the cosmos as an impersonal spirit, energy, or life force
4. Aliveness of the cosmos: the cosmos is not inanimate but alive
5. Holism: the sacred connects everything within the cosmos
6. Self-spirituality: the sacred resides within rather than without the self
7. Experiential epistemology: experiences & emotions are emanations of the spiritual self within

Post-Christian Spirituality Scale - NL

1. Hoewel de enige ware religie niet bestaat, zijn er wel waarheden die je in alle religieuze tradities kunt terugvinden.
2. Persoonlijke spiritualiteit is belangrijker dan trouw aan een religieuze traditie.
3. Er bestaat een soort geest of levenskracht die overal in aanwezig is.
4. De kosmos is een levend geheel.
5. Het gehele universum komt voort uit één alomvattende spirituele energie.
6. Het goddelijke bevindt zich niet ergens daarbuiten, maar binnenin ieder persoon.
7. Elke persoon heeft een hoger spiritueel 'zelf' dat gewekt en verlicht kan worden.

Thank you for your attention!

Paul Tromp

Centre for Sociological Research

KU Leuven, Belgium

paul.tromp@kuleuven.be