BIRGITTE SCHEPELERN JOHANSEN

Post-secular sociology
Modes, possibilities and challenges

For long time secularization has been a recurring trope in sociological studies of religion.[1] Contested by some (Berger 1999, Casanova 1994 and 2006, Luckmann 1970), vigorously defended by others (Bruce 2000), or rethought, modified and policed (Asad 2003, Habermas 2006a, de Vries 2006), the role of religion in modern, democratic societies, seen through the lens of secularization has consistently remained a field of academic interest and research. More than this, secularization (as well as related concepts of secularity, the secular and secularism) is part of the rich and multi-layered historical and cultural context that has provided the epistemological foundations of and scholarly ideals for many aspects of the academic study of religion. However, during the last decade or so, scholarly as well as political debates have demonstrated an awareness that 'something has happened' – something that has prompted an alteration of, or at least placed a question mark after, notions of secularization, the secular and secularism.

Firstly, Peter Berger (1999) attempted to grasp awareness of this change by adding a 'de-' to the notion of secularization, and some eight years later Jürgen Habermas (2008) suggested the addition of the prefix 'post' to the notion of the secular. Ever since then a rather heated scholarly debate has taken place regarding the empirical groundings, the explanatory potentials and normative values of concepts such as post-secularity and post-secularism (e.g. Harrington 2007, Bader 2012, Gorski *et al.* 2012, McGhee 2013). However, what these discussions seem to reveal is perhaps more than anything the complex and evasive character of the changes they are trying to grasp. Are we confronted with significant alterations in the religious profiles of people living in a Western context, which among other things are due to migration from other parts of the globe and which have turned out not to follow the anticipated routes of modernity? Are we dealing with changes in the normative landscape of political legitimacy? Are we realizing some (religious) aspects of life that have been there all along but hiding in the dark corners of grand narratives of a decline in the significance of the role of religion? Or are we talking about changes that are mainly taking place within academic circles, where various forms of deconstruction and post-colonial critique have put the category of religion and secular normativity under scrutiny? Borrowing a succinct expression from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, we seem indeed to confront a case of both 'shifting aims and moving targets' (2005: 1); that is to say there has been a simultaneous alteration of scholarly perspectives and societal junctures. The conceptions of the secular and the post-secular, the narratives they allow for and the social reality the terms seek to grasp are at one and the same time *objects* for the scholarly observation and shifting *contexts* that shape, push and compel us to tell certain stories and to choose certain research strategies. The confusions are not surprising!

This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing conceptual clarification as to how we can understand the alterations of the secular by focusing on the shifting aims and grounds that we as *scholars* inhabit when we try to get a hold of our moving targets of social reality (knowing of course all too well that we ourselves are part of this moving target). What kinds of shifts

1 I want to express my thanks to colleagues at the University of Copenhagen and the University of Oslo for fruitful discussions on the points made in this article. Especially thanks to Andreas Bandak and Thomas Brudholm for insightful help in developing the arguments.

are we actually or potentially dealing with? And if we assert that the academic disciplines that have religion as their specific object are part and parcel of secularization (as a historical trajectory) and the secular (as a state of affairs), what would a shift from the secular to the post-secular imply for these disciplines? It is a curiosity towards these questions that governs this article. I will here suggest three different ways of understanding the post-secular which all take their point of departure from the same conceptualization of the secular, namely as always implying a claim about the separation of religion from other spheres in society. Each of these three understandings of the post-secular points towards ways of moving beyond this defining idea of separation, and I will discuss how they hold at one and the same time a potential for sociology to open up towards new approaches to the study of religion *and* also potentially undermine our attempts to delimit and grasp the object of study, perhaps making some forms of scholarship obsolete. Even though my main focus is on academic practices, as will become apparent along the way, connections can also be made with processes within the political realm as well.

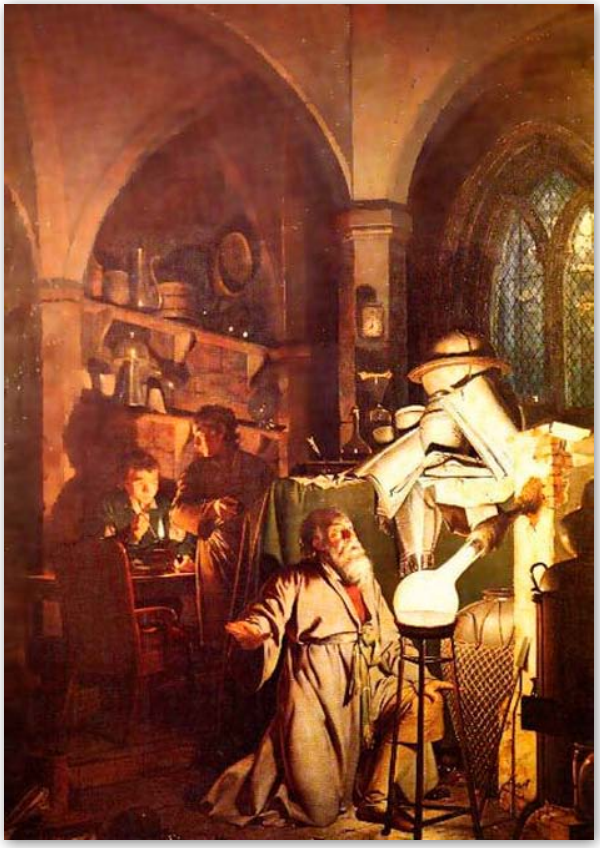
Academia beyond books

In pursuing my interrogation of the post-secular and its potential implications for the sociology of religion (and probably also for a range of the other disciplines that have defined themselves specifically through reference to the category religion), I will not solely take as my point of departure the contents of publications, which is where discussions about academic positions and developments are normally anchored (Ong 1982, Barth 2000). Publications are the formal end product of academic activity, and they tend therefore to obtain a position as the natural object of observation in descriptions of scholarly positions, discussions and conflicts. Publications have a fixity that makes them mobile and enduring, but they also tend to be policed and 'cleansed' of certain types of information (Barth 2000: 2). By this I mean that texts seldom contain traits of the awkwardness that the authors might have experienced while producing them, nor do they document the affective investment that is inherent in the topic of research. Also, the hierarchies of power and the hegemonies of the academic system which have made this and not that stance appropriate tend either to be absent or at least implicit at the level of the texts. Therefore, in this article I will also draw on other kinds of material, namely participant observation and interviews, as a supplement to the textual sources, because it is in the personal interactions that some of the frictions and ruptures of the shifts in context for the academic praxis that I am interested in reveal themselves. Thus, I will exemplify and substantiate some of the more large-scale discussions of the secular and the predicaments of sociological studies of religion by drawing on a qualitative, praxis-oriented research on secular identities and agendas carried out at the religious studies departments at two Danish universities from 2006–9 (Johansen 2010, 2011).

The sociology of religion and the secular imaginary

Before entering into the analysis of current academic debates and displacements, some basic clarifications regarding my take on the topic are needed. If we set out by asserting that the term 'post-secular' attempts to grasp a situation in which we have somehow moved beyond or away from the secular, an obvious route to take is to start out by clarifying what we mean by 'the secular'. Here I would argue that the notion of the secular in many respects holds some of the same properties as other 'grand narrative' terms, such as, for example, modernity and globalization: it is at one and the same time the description of a state of affairs, a certain theoretical claim, an ideal for societal organization, and a project of getting there. All of this, we could, using a perhaps somewhat worn-out expression, refer to as the 'secular imaginary'; in other words, a certain way of perceiving, describing and engaging with the world that confirms the existence of something called religion, which is distinguishable from and ideally separated from non-religion (see also Asad 2003:13–14; Fitzgerald 2000: 106). This imaginary is of course constantly changing and contested, but nevertheless it is constituted by a range of differentiations or separations. These differentiations imply both semantic and conceptual separations of religion from a range of other terms, categories and concepts such as law, politics and science, making it possible to discuss whether this or that phenomenon, institution, action or argument is 'religious' or something else – for example 'scientific' or 'political'. Further, the separations are also institutional separations of, for example, the churches (and other religious organizations) from institutions such as parliament, the courts and the universities (Luhmann 1982). It is, among other things, through these separations that a distinct sphere which can be termed 'religion' comes into being, and even though the separations

Wikimedia Commons



Joseph Wright: *The Alchymist in Search of the Philosopher's Stone, Discovers Phosphorus, and prays for the successful Conclusion of his operation, as was the custom of the Ancient Chymical Astrologers* (1771). Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Derby.

are sometimes unclear and elusive they still make it possible to act and talk *as if* they were clear and self-evidently given.

Outside the academic sphere, articulating the specificities of the sphere of religion often draw on a vocabulary related to Protestant Christianity as the prototype religion and it is often coloured by the language of the emerging natural sciences (Arnal 2000: 13; Asad 2003: 23; King 1999: 13). Thus, the category 'religion' often acquires its meaning by being connoted with beliefs – with the transcendent or supernatural (as opposed to knowledge) – not the natural, and it is also often assessed qualitatively, with levels of sincerity and interior conviction being the yardstick by which the more or less religious is measured – rather than levels of praxis or experience. Understood in this way, the secular (as a certain way of both describing and configuring social reality) and religion (as a distinct category within this social reality) emerged in tandem. This emergence of course has a long and complex history – one that cannot be recapitulated here. However, some brief remarks on the trajectories of one of the central and constitutive separations for the secular imaginary, namely that between religion and science, is necessary in order to understand the developments and predicaments of the academic studies of religion that I will discuss later on.

The distinction between the categories of religion and science is a semantic cornerstone, both in the formations of church and university as distinctly separate institutions and in broader popular discourses on religion and modernity. And often the distinction is articulated as being the result of a long process in which science has been gradually liberated from religion (Drees 2008, Latour 2002, McMullin 2008). This narrative about what philosopher and historian Ernan McMullin (2008: 40) has called 'the grand religion–science conflict' has a certain dramatic structure, where a series of irreversible revolutions are seen progressively to have led to the final separation of science from religion and thus moved history from a dark past into an era of enlightenment. It is a narrative with its own heroes and villains, characterized by certain key events such as the Copernican revolution, Galilei's conviction and the evolutionary theories of Darwin, which have undermined the biblical worldview, and through these events we have gained more and truer knowledge of how things *really* are (King 1999, Andersen and Munk Jensen 2006). It is also a narrative with two central premises, namely; 1) that science, when liberated from religion, will provide us with increased factual and more empirically correct knowledge of how the world is, while religion is at best irrelevant and at worst a hindrance to this development; and 2) that science and religion appear in the singular as monolithic and clearly demarcated entities, serviced by distinct institutions. This narrative was mainly coined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries[2] – a period in which several European countries witnessed a *Kulturkampf* between conservative, church-minded voices and their liberal, anti-clerical opponents (Molendijk and Pels

2 Not least due to the work of two Americans, the philosopher, chemist and historian William Draper (1811–82) and the philosopher Andrew Dickson White (1832–1918) who wrote extensively on the problematic role of the Church with regards to scientific freedom. The solution for both was that science would eventually prevail, making religion obsolete – a position rearticulated several times, not least during the blooming of new atheism in the latter half of the twentieth century.

1998). It was also the period which saw the growth in empirical, positivistically-oriented social sciences, and it was the time where the first chairs for the historical, comparative study of religion were founded at European universities (Sharp 1986). And, I will argue, it still forms the basis for at least some aspects of the disciplinary fields of the sociology of religion and the history of religion.

This narrative of the separation of religion and science, with its emphasis on the unity and emancipation of the scientific realm is obviously not the only one to be told about the history of science, and it has been challenged and modified on several occasions (see Drees 2008 for example). Nevertheless it has played a crucial role in shaping the way we (also as scholars) think about the category of religion, not least in terms of its – often oppositional – relation to notions of the natural, the empirically testable, or the factual. Religion becomes that which escapes the empirically testable: it becomes the subjective (in the shape of beliefs and convictions), which should not be allowed to interfere with the work of the scholar – and it becomes a sphere about which the scholar ideally should not make any judgements. It is also interesting in this respect that the notion of methodological agnosticism was born precisely out of late nineteenth-century debates on science and religion.[3] This position still seems to be the most – if not the only – legitimate way for scholars of religion to articulate the relationship between scholar and object (Droogers 1996), and in a sense it embodies the ethos of the modern, secularizing state, because it demands neutrality towards and evaluative equality between the various religions (Johansen 2011). Thus, the formation of the category of religion is also tied to a certain way of organizing reality: as religion gradually becomes excluded from the realm of the empirically real, 'the social' or 'history' emerges as the final and only accessible context for all activities, including the human activities that are categorized as religious (Milbanks 1991: 101; see also Asad 2003: 191). And if we follow the narrative through in its original version, a decline in, and ultimately the disappearance of, religion would be the end result (see Casanova 1994 for an overview and critique).

While the supernatural or the transempirical, when identifying something as religion, have also been widely applied as key features within the scholarly disciplines of religion, the particular colouring of

the category 'religion' as pertaining to inward beliefs and sincerity has mostly been prevalent outside the academic sphere of the social and humanist sciences of religion. Thus, large parts of the academic work done on religion since the founding fathers such as Max Müller, Cornelius Petrus Tiele and later on Mircea Eliade, have been characterized by attempts exactly to escape this 'Christo-centric' approach to religion (Johansen 2010: 228–34; see also de Vries 2008). The attempts to avoid a category of religion that simply replicates the features of Protestant Christianity have in some settings resulted in a scholarly emphasis on religious practices, rituals, experiences and emotions instead of, for example, the assertion of more or less coherent 'theologies' as cognitive or moral systems (see also Orsi 2004). However, the notion of belief, with its connotations of conviction, worldview, imagination and non-knowledge is, I have argued, still also very much present as the epitome of the category of religion in the academic sphere (Johansen 2010: 231). The recurring focus on faith and beliefs is especially present in oral disseminations of academic ideas, such as in contexts of teaching, informal socializing, or in the question and answer sessions following presentations of papers at seminars and conferences; disseminations that are all unleashed from the more tightly-structured forms of the publications, lectures and conference presentations. So even though many scholars of religion take pride in distancing themselves from what is perceived as mainstream, Christian conceptions of religion, the question 'what do they believe?' remains a favourite one.

The formation of the modern category of religion by means of its distinction from various categories of non-religion, such as science, politics and law,[4]

3 The term was coined by Thomas Huxley, the younger apprentice of Charles Darwin.

4 Other contexts and developments could obviously be mentioned as equally important for the formation of the category of religion, including among others

have of course played out in a variety of different ways, perhaps making it more appropriate to speak of secular imaginaries in the plural (Casanova 2008, Modood 2011). However, evoking the notion of the secular, explicitly articulated or implicitly alluded to, always implies this reference to a separation between religion and something else – let us just refer to it as non-religion. This idea of a possible separation (of categories, arguments, practices, institutions, convictions, sentiments) lies at the heart of secular epistemology, and this idea still functions as a powerful point of identification and structuration for political as well as scholarly discourses (see also Taylor 2007). To give a practical example: the students on the first year courses at the department where I did my PhD research in 2006 to 2009 were constantly reminded, that of course you can be religious and study religion at a scientific level at the same time – but then you should really know effectively how to *separate things*. If you do not, it will be noticed and you may occasionally be sanctioned more or less explicitly for, for example, lack of objectivity and neutrality or for expressions of subjective bias or for attempting to promote a religious agenda under the cover of scientific discourse (Johansen 2011).

Summing up: the point is that our object of study (religion) and our ways of engaging with it, delimiting it, and policing it, are entangled in the history of a certain epistemological framework of, among other things, differentiation/separations, the empirical and rational grounding of academic work, and the idea of the social as the ultimate context for and cause of – well – everything. This context is what Charles Taylor (2007: 539) has termed 'the immanent frame', and it is also here that we find the idea of the subjective *inside* sharply separated from the objective *outside*, it is here that we find the idea of the neutral ground from where we can observe things as they really are, it is here that we find the distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, between the factual and the illusory (rather than the good and the bad) which is constitutive of the category of religion – and which still largely frames and legitimizes academic work (see also Asad 2003: 28–36).

colonialism, missionary activities and religious apologetics, see W. C. Smith 1963, Chidester 1996, King 1999, Masuzawa 2005, Fitzgerald 2007, Johansen 2010 for overviews and discussions.

Predicaments

The embeddedness of the category of religion in a certain semantic and epistemological landscape where religion and science are positioned on each side of a rather sharp divide is, I will argue, the reason why the disciplines that have religion as their distinct and defining object have been somewhat reluctant to embrace the more radical versions of deconstruction, actor network theory, social constructivism and the like (see also Droogers 1996, Stausberg 2008, Spickard 2009 for similar observations). Here, I would suspect some objections, because obviously you can find scholars working within these academic strands among sociologists and historians of religion (see, e.g., Chidester 1996, Fitzgerald 2000, King 1999, McCutcheon 1997 and 2003). But I will still claim that reluctance about going too far down this path is present as a basic tendency in many areas of the field, and this tendency manifests itself openly on certain occasions. And this is where I will turn to the narrower empirical context for my reflections, namely my work on the academic practices at two of the Danish departments for the study of religion (the departments host both the history and sociology of religion).

Based on participant observation in class, interviews with staff and scrutiny of the texts used in teaching, as well as hanging out at the departmental meetings, seminars and lunches, combined with observations of and conversations with colleagues from other geographical contexts, I made the case that at least some areas of the academic practice were pervaded by what I would call modern ideals of knowledge and science. By this I mean that notions of unbiased objectivity as an ideal (however regulatory), of a straightforwardly accessible empirical reality upon which we can all agree, of universalism, of clear-cut categories and of accumulative knowledge prevailed (see also Bauman 1991, Latour 2002). Further, when the story of a study was told, it was mostly (but again, not always) by means of reference to the aforementioned narrative of the religion–science conflict: the narrative of the gradual liberation of science – in the singular – from the irrational restrictions of religion. And these ideals simultaneously imposed meanings on the category of religion as being composed of the subjective, the biased, the non-empirical, the supernatural, non-knowledge and so on. The interesting thing, however, was that obviously there were other prominent conceptualizations of religion and other scholarly approaches which referred more to academic strands such as hermeneutics or discourse analysis, which problematize ideas of pure observa-

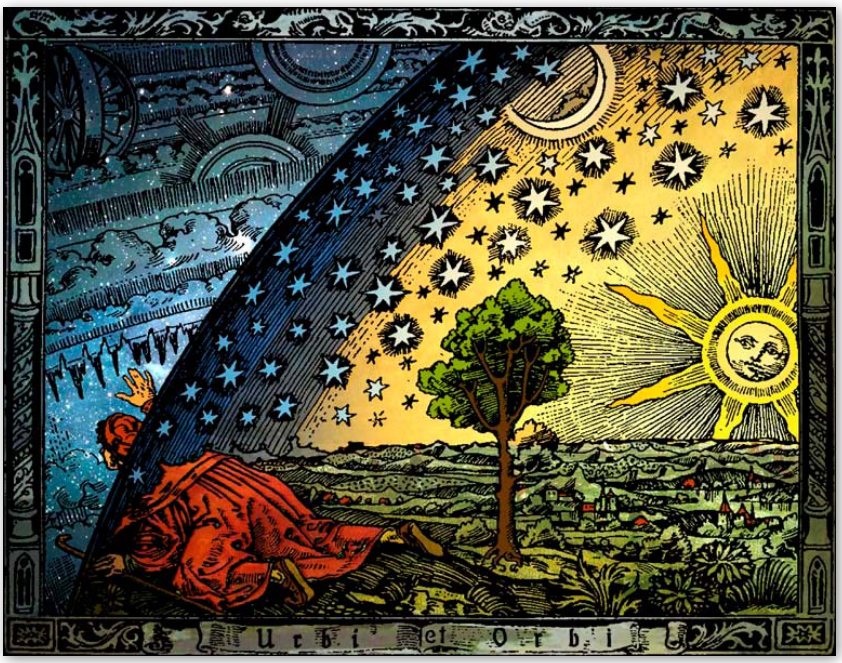
tion or neutral grounds. And there were versions of the history of the study which focused more on colonialism, power/knowledge relations and politics. But when articulating the relationship explicitly between religion and science as abstract categories, the modern narrative seemed immediately to structure the discourse into a polarized field of opposed positions, with no middle ground possible.

One of the things that was particularly interesting to notice was the affective investments that several of the employees and students at the department had in defending and sanctioning these polarizations. Especially the search for what we could call a religious 'pollution' of the scientific sphere in the work of other scholars, or the (alleged) religious commitment of a colleague seemed to be a rather gleeful or exciting activity, not least in teaching situations. The same kind of engagement revealed itself in the search for especially Christian biases in historical sources or theoretical frameworks. This search for the separation and purification of the realms of science and religion can, I will suggest, best be understood as a variation on the theme of ideological de-masking, which as Bruno Latour has argied is one of the hallmarks of modern science (Latour 2002: 60–71). Alongside the affirmation of modern, secular ideals of research, I noticed that the more radical deconstructivist and social constructivist approaches to the scientific work were not something that was immediately welcomed by several researchers. Not because they were not known or understood – because they were and are – but people seemed either disinterested or very *ad hoc* in their way of using them. Or they downright rejected them because, as one informant eloquently put it: 'These kinds of arguments make the study of religion nothing more than a store-house of opinion' (Jensen 2003: 270). Either way, slight irritation was not uncommon when confronted with various deconstructionist or 'post'-perspectives.

Subsequently, I discovered that I did not stand alone in this observation of scholarly preferences. Writing the history of the academic study of religion in Europe, the Norwegian historian of religion Michael Stausberg (2008) has noted the same kind of distancing from – or willed ignorance of – the academic strands that go most straightforwardly into the heartland of the epistemology of modern science. And in 2009 the American sociologist of religion, Jim Spickard, organized a session at the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) conference on exactly this theme, which he introduced with the following words:

> The sociology of religion has lagged behind other fields in the way we think about how we generate knowledge. Where other disciplines argue about the relative merits of positivism, social constructivism, critical realism, and standpoint theory, we, with few exceptions, rehash the thirty-year-old debate about "objectivity" and "subjectivity" – and do so in relatively naive terms. (Spickard 2009: 1.)

Of course this is by no means a fair description of all work done by sociologists of religion (neither was it intended so by Spickard). It was rather an attempt to mark a tendency, a consciousness, a certain intonation that seems to pervade much of the work being done within the discipline. The question that I find interesting on this occasion is the following: if we take these observations of the sociological study of religion as adequate, why do some disciplines more readily catch on to certain ideas than others?



Universum. C. Flammarion, Holzschnitt, Paris 1888. Kolorit: Heikenwaelder Hugo, Wien 1998.

And why are some approaches avoided? In the case of the sciences of religion, I will argue that this specific tendency has to do with the fact that academic approaches that favour what the Danish sociologist Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen has termed 'empty ontologies' (Andersen 1999), such as the more radical deconstructivist or discourse-oriented approaches, potentially challenge a lot of the basic distinctions in the secular imaginary which have upheld the category of religion as an observable object for the scholar. These approaches question the idea of neutrality, of objectivity, of knowledge (in the singular) as opposed to various kinds of non-knowledge, be they opinions, beliefs, or faiths. And perhaps most importantly: they question the idea of an ontological solidity that forms the basis of any assessments of the natural or the empirical testable, as contrasted with the supernatural. Instead they oftentimes promote contingency and the exercise of power as the main source of academic legitimacy, rather than factual knowledge. And by doing so, they challenge one side of the defining relationship in the religion/science complex whilst simultaneously making the other side elusive and maybe even illusive. This might also be the reason why even scholars of other disciplines that go down the more radical 'post'-alleys are still reluctant about its consequences when it comes to religion. Even though written some fifteen years ago, I still fully agree with the Dutch anthropologist André Droogers who has argued that regardless of the epistemological ruptures that have made obsolete claims to a unified objective position for the scholar and opened the doors for multi-sited observations and positions, the only remaining legitimate position to be taken towards religion is methodological agnosticism and its claim to neutrality. He encapsulates the situation thus: 'Methodological theism remains taboo, despite lip-service to post-modernism' (Droogers 1996: 52). The potential challenge of modern, secular epistemology that lies within this field is maybe the reason why at least some theologians, as opposed to many sociologists of religion, have caught on very positively to the more radical deconstructivist and post-modernist theorizations, because they have opened new possibilities for theology as a legitimate voice in the academic field (for example Milbanks 1991, Sløk 1999, Cheetham 2005).

Post-secular sociology?

So, being part and parcel of a secular imaginary, where categories not only of religion, science, politics and law but also of the factual, the illusory, the objective and the subjective, knowledge, faith and empirical materiality are organized in relation to each other in certain ways, where is the academic study of religion left if, as some scholars have argued, we are moving towards contexts characterized not by secularity but by post-secularity? The philosopher Hent de Vries formulates the challenge that might be posed by such a shift in the study of religion as follows: it would constitute

> the task of rethinking "religion" and "religious studies" in a contemporary world whose institutions and publics are increasingly "post-secular" in their outlook, suspended – at least in the West – between on the one hand an Enlightenment project and a democratic republicanism and liberalism originally premised upon rationalization, differentiation, and privatization, and, on the other, a less explicit process of reenchantment, if not outright remythologization (deVries 2008: xiii).

Some of the discussions and lines of conflict mentioned in the previous section could be seen precisely as a reaction to such challenges through an insistence or reinforcement of secular semantics, which in some contexts are under reconfiguration. But let us try to be more precise. Taking a closer look at the post-secular challenge that de Vries points to, I will suggest that we should distinguish between at least three different, yet interrelated understandings of the post-secular which may each imply different possible roads for the sociological study of religion. I will here allow myself the somewhat non-sociological luxury of engaging in more tentative speculations in order to illuminate some current movements and tendencies. However, such speculations should never overlook the actual practices and displacements that take place both inside and outside the academy.

Keeping the categories

If we start by affirming that the post-secular always refers to a situation in which we have somehow moved beyond the secular, and that the secular at its core is about the separation of religion from non-religion, sometimes linked to a decline in the religious sphere, we could start by exploring the post-secular which is understood as the living on, or maybe even resurgence, of religion. The term post-secular is here an attempt to grasp that the prediction

about a steady decline in the role of religion as an inevitable consequence of processes of modernization has turned out to be untenable, forcing the secular states to reckon with the endurance of religion and thus to re-think their self-perception (de Vries 2006: 3). This is the understanding of the post-secular that we find in the work of, for example, Jürgen Habermas (2006b, 2008), who is one of the scholars who has contributed most profoundly to coining the term. In his lecture of 2007 (published 2008) 'Notes on a post-secular society' Habermas characterizes Western societies as post-secular because they have had to come to terms with the ongoing relevance of religion. Religious institutions as well as religious arguments remain or reappear as legitimate points of reference in peoples' lives (including their political lives), and the presence of visible religious minorities, especially Muslims, have boosted the awareness among otherwise disengaged 'cultural' Christians about their own religious backgrounds. Further, non-European societies have in many cases followed other paths than the one outlined in the theoretical complex of the 'secularization paradigm' (Bruce 2000) which includes functional differentiation, constitutional democracy, scientific evolution and the gradual fading away, or at least privatization, of religion. Regarding the political realm, this situation has caused some scholars to talk about 'a crisis in secularism' (for example Roy 2007), pointing to the need to rethink legitimate political self-identities in terms other than secularism. This is not because the populations in Europe have become more religious on a personal level, but because of the acute awareness that the grand narrative of secular modernity has proved itself wrong. Other scholars have described some of the same developments, but under the heading of de-secularization rather than post-secularity (Berger 1999).

In this version of the post-secular the basic separations between religion and other categories are maintained. What is challenged is rather the idea of a decline in the presence and importance of religion. For the sociology of religion, this way of moving beyond the secular merely provides an increase in topics for investigation and probably also an increase in the political relevance of and interest in the research being done, that is, more work and more funding. And in many aspects, this has in fact been the case for the last decade or so, where we have witnessed a growing interest in religion in many strands of academia, often focused on Islam and Muslims. This focus has been spurred by the increasing political interest in the entanglement of religion in discussions of identity, belonging, migration, and social cohesion; themes that will continue to be of interest for any state that guards its borders and maintains citizenship as an entry to social benefits. In this version of post-secularity, the basic structures of and premises for the sociological study of religion remain largely unquestioned. The real challenge is continuously to avoid the slippery slope of responsive sociology where the majority of the research being done is framed by questions formulated in the political sphere. This situation has to some extent already and for some years now been the reality regarding sociological work on Islam and Muslims in a Western context, where much research is carried out within a security nexus of religion, integration and radicalization (Sunier 2009, Johansen and Spielhaus 2012).

Re-configuring the categories

While the prior notion of post-secularity pertains to a rejection of the 'decline' aspect of the secular imaginary, the following one rather pertains to a re-arrangement of the 'separation' aspect. Thus, we could also pursue the 'moving beyond the secular' as a question of religion's resurgence or (re-)appearance in domains of society from which it has hitherto been functionally separated. That is, we might be witnessing a weakening of the polarizing effect of secular discourses. Let us first look at the institutional level. Here the term 'post-secular' would refer to a situation in which institutions that have previously been defined by their separation from religion open their doors to discussions and forms of institutional cooperation which have previously been considered illegitimate. With regards to the political system, theorists such as Chantal Mouffe have advocated this approach with regard to the appearance of religion in politics. Under the heading of radical democracy, or democratic supremacy, the argument is that the public spaces, as the ground for dialogue and debate, should be maintained in their structural forms, but it should be legitimate to pursue any kind of goal or to adopt any style of reasoning – including religious ones – as long as the ground rules of the institution are kept (Mouffe 2006). In somewhat the same way, especially scholars such as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1990) and theologian David Cheetham (2005) have, with regard to the university, argued for the abandonment of neutrality and universality as carriers of authority for academic work. Instead the university should become a space for engaged disagreement and dialogue between different epistemic

horizons. Such an idea of the university might, according to Cheetham

> contrast with more liberal, modernistic notions of a neutral space which, for example, perceives religious and moral commitments as interference in objective enquiries and seeks scholars who engage as detached observers rather than as protagonists (Cheetham 2005: 18).

Of course there have always been scholars who identify themselves as religious, but the point here is that this should no longer be policed within the boundaries of methodological agnosticism. Rather, the methodological agnosticism should be abandoned in favour of, for example, genuine atheism, agnosticism, Christian beliefs or Buddhist cosmologies, as legitimate horizons for the production of knowledge. And the sociologists could, instead of taking for granted that 'the social' is the natural framework for our argumentation (the most important discussions being to refine the methods for its investigation), take it on as a priority task to show the work being done in the name of the idea of 'social reality' – where it originates and emanates, what purposes it serves – and argue why it should be privileged as the context *sine qua non* for the academic work. This line of argument, which promotes an epistemic pluralism, has also been promoted among the departments of European universities which have attempted to open their doors to Islamic theologists as legitimate members of the secular university (Johansen 2006, 2008).

Breaking down the categories

In the just described version of the post-secular, the institutions (parliament, or the university) and the categories (religion, politics and science) remain, but the possible ways they can relate to each other has changed. But we could also imagine a third version of post-secularity, which is perhaps a radicalized version of the second. This version is by far the most speculative of the three proposed understandings of the post-secular; nevertheless there do seem to be detectable outlines of it, especially in the more anthropologically-oriented areas of the study of religion. In this version of the post-secular, the issue at stake is not that religion appears in spheres from which it has hitherto been excluded. The issue is whether in some academic areas we are witnessing a more profound reconfiguration, or even breakdown, of the distinctions that have previously imposed meaning on categories such as religion and science. In this case the post-secular relates to the secular as does post-modernity to modernity: they both involve moving beyond a set of logics that have previously set the scene. In the case of the study of religion, one of my own observations supporting this tendency, however limited it may be, is that some of the core projects that have hitherto engaged (and enraged) scholars of religion, have lost their zest. Among these are the formation and cultivation of a scholarly category of religion that is not tinged with Christian connotations. This project has by no means been rejected by the younger generations of scholars, but it simply does not appear to be so pressing anymore. And maybe this has to do with a weakening of other projects as well, because the same goes for the work that such a category of scholarship was intended to do: namely to make possible an objective, fair and above all, neutral, analysis of the various religions. Such a project may for some have become untenable due to, among other things, challenges emanating from other scholarly discourses. Among these are, besides the discourse of de-constructivism, those which challenge the modern, Western hegemony in the shape of new scholarly discourses from the former periphery ('the empire writes back') and more recently those which favour notions of un-decidedness and over-determination in social relations. The consequence of such a situation in which the secular insistence on sharp boundaries, at least in some parts of academia, is under fire, is that the term religion might very well prevail (and nothing currently suggests that it will disappear); people will continue to use it and the amount of research on things that are termed religious will most likely increase. But the secular semantic landscape (not to be confused with a tiny branch of this landscape called secularization theory, paradigms and so on) might steadily erode, and as a consequence 'religion' as a unifying and im-

mediately understandable term seems to be losing its received reference (de Vries 2008: 1). This weakening of ideals, positions and battle-lines which have previously provided a strong sense of direction for the sociology of religion sometimes leads to the increased insistence on exactly these ideals – and it potentially freezes or fossilizes some aspects of the sciences of religion (Johansen 2010: 262–7).

Another way to handle such fragmentations besides the re-enforcement of modern ideals of science is to let go of the sharp and defining distinctions between religion and science, and instead engage in what André Droogers has called the one-field approach (Droogers 2008). Such a shift implies that the hierarchical gap between researcher and object is reduced by eschewing the ideals of a neutral, observational researcher who is concerned with bias. Instead the scholar should engage in an active subject-to-subject interaction. Yet another approach is to favour a heightened focus on flows, assemblages and the oftentimes undecided character of life, instead of objectifying distinct areas of peoples' lives as expressions of 'religion'. These kinds of approaches can, for example, be discerned in the increasing tendency among anthropologists especially, as well as different kinds of scholars of religion, to focus on the displacements of what we hitherto have termed religion, and how these displacements are intimately interwoven into the textures of everyday life (see, e.g., Orsi 2004, Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Jeldtoft 2011, Bandak 2012). One consequence of the focus on everyday life, assemblages, flows and un-decidedness is that another core notion of the study of religion becomes less obvious; namely the idea of systematized, identifiable religions – in the plural – incorporating a certain belief system, certain canonical texts and a distinct set of rituals (Droogers 2008: 452). Both earlier and more recent works on the idea of world religions (W. C. Smith 1963, J. Z. Smith 1978, Masuzawa 2005) have argued that the notion of distinct religions might end up in somewhat the same predicament that anthropology has experienced with regard to the idea of distinct cultures: that it is the product of a certain type of analytical observation made by the scholar rather than an empirical reality. When approaching the contexts in which people actually live their lives, such distinct entities tend to dissolve into a muddle (Clifford 1988).

The dissolving, fully or partially, of the notion of distinct, identifiable religions can provide interesting insights into the everyday lives of people (including those of scholars); however they might eventually render problematic one of the core 'products' of the classical sociology of religion, namely the ongoing, large-scale, quantitative surveys. First and foremost because these surveys are based precisely upon the idea of the existence of distinct, identifiable religions (again mainly Christianity, Judaism, Islam) which are characterized by certain beliefs and certain practices. If this kind of categorization eventually becomes academically untenable, then major readjustments in the lines of enquiry will be needed, which makes long-term comparison problematic.

Finally, I cannot help but wonder if the letting go of the central, defining distinctions surrounding the category 'religion', especially when combined with a focus on the flows of everyday life, may not increasingly render the very task of determining whether what you study is religion or not more or less irrelevant. As the theologian Gert Theissen (2004) suggested a couple of years ago, the study of religion in which it is understood as something which is practised in distinct disciplines will dissolve into more general studies of culture – a destiny it is likely to share with theology. The central challenge for the sociology of religion will then be to survive as a distinct, yet meaningful discipline with an obvious object, rather than becoming an obscure branch of anthropology or sociology, because we no longer have a straightforward answer to the question: the sociology of what? However, should this be the case, there is not necessarily anything to mourn: scholarly disciplines emerge and vanish in conjunction with our way of knowing the world; new connections and cooperations are established, new stories, agendas and stakes will engage us if we are ready to embrace them. And as for now, the sociology of religion is still very much a part of the academic landscape. ■

Birgitte Schepelern Johansen is a sociologist of religion, and she holds a PhD from Minority Studies and Religion at the Institute for Cross Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, where she is currently a post doctoral fellow. Empirically, her research has mainly focused on the role and function of religion in secular institutions of higher education, especially with regards to Islamic theology and imam training. Theoretically, she partakes in the ongoing exploration of the formations of secular space and secular normativity. Email: bjohansen(at)hum.ku.dk

References

Andersen, Casper, and Anders Munk Jensen 2006. *Videnskab og religion i historisk perspektiv. Naturens fortolkere.* Aarhus: Systime.

Andersen, Niels Åkerstrøm 1999. *Diskursiveanalysestrategier. Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann*. Copenhagen: Nytfra Samfundsvidenskaberne.

Arnal, William E. 2000. Definition. In *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon and Willi Braun, 21–34. London: Continuum.

Asad, Talal 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bader, Veit 2012. Post-secularism or liberal-democratic constitutionalism. *Erasmus Law Review* 5(1): 5–26.

Bandak, Andreas 2012. Problems of belief: tonalities of immediacy among Christians in Damascus. *Erasmus Law Review* 5(1): 5–26.

Barth, Fredrik 2000. An anthropology of knowledge. *Current Anthropology* 43(1): 1–18.

Bauman, Zygmunt 1991. *Modernity and Ambivalence.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Berger, Peter L. (ed.) 1999. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics.* Washington, DC: The Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Bruce, Steve 2000. *God is Dead: Secularization in the West.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Casanova, José 1994. *Public Religion in the Modern World*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

—2006. Rethinking secularization: a global comparative perspective. *Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture* 8(1–2): 7–22.

—2008. Public religions revisited. In *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries, 101–19. New York: Fordham University Press.

Cheetham, David 2005. The university and interfaith education. *Studies in Interreligious dialogue* 15(1): 16–35.

Chidester, David 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Clifford, James 1988. *The Predicaments of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

de Vries, Hent 2001. In media res: global religions, public spheres, and the role of contemporary comparative religious studies. In *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, 3–42. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Drees, Willem B. 2008. Academic freedom and the symbolic significance of evolution. In *The Study of Religion and the Training of Muslim Clergy in Europe: Academic and Religious Freedom in the 21th Century*, ed. Willem B. Drees and Sjoerd van Koningsveld, 464–72. Leiden: Leiden University Press.

Droogers, André 1996. Methodological ludism: beyond religionism and reductionism. In *Conflicts in Social Sciences*, ed. Anton van Harskamp, 44–67. London: Routledge.

—2008. As close as a scholar can get: exploring a one-field approach to the study of religion. In *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries, 448–63. New York: Fordham University Press.

Fitzgerald, Timothy 2000. *The Ideology of Religious Studies.* New York: Oxford University Press.

—(ed.) 2007. *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations.* London: Equinox.

Geertz, Clifford 2005. Shifting aims, moving targets: on the anthropology of religion. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11(1): 1–15.

Gorski, Philip, David K. Kim, John Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds) 2012. *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society.* New York: NYU Press.

Habermas, Jürgen 2006a. On the relations between the secular liberal state and religion. In *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, 251–60. Fordham: Fordham University Press.

—2006b. Religion in the public sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy* 14(1): 1–25.

—2008. Notes on a post-secular society. Lecture given at Tilberg University March 15 2007. *Sign and Sight*, 18.6.2008. <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html> (accessed 26.3.2013).

Harrington, Austin 2007. Habermas and the 'post-secular society'. *European Journal of Social Theory* 10(4): 543–60.

Heelas, Paul, and Linda Woodhead 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Jeldtoft, Nadia 2011. Lived Islam: religious identities with 'non-organized' Muslim minorities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34: 1134–51.

Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2003. *The Study of Religion in a New Key: Theoretical and Philosophical Soundings in the Comparative and General Study of Religion.* Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

Johansen, Birgitte Schepelern 2006. *Islam at the European Universities.* Report from University of Copenhagen.

—2010. *Adskillelsenslogic. En undersøgelse af sekulære kategoriseringer af religion i akademisk praksis.* PhD dissertation, Copenhagen University.

—2011. 'Doing the secular': academic practices in the study of religion at two Danish universities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10(3): 279–93.

Johansen, Birgitte Schepelern, and Riem Spielhaus 2012. Counting deviance: revisiting a decade's production of quantitative surveys among Muslims in Europe. *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 1(1): 81–112.

King, Richard 1999. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'.* London and New York: Routledge.

Latour, Bruno 2002. *We Have Never been Modern.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Luckmann, Thomas 1970. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society.* New York: Macmillan.

Luhmann, Niklas 1982. *The Differentiation of Society.* New York: Colombia University Press.
MacIntyre, Alasdair 1990. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry.* London: Duckworth.
Masuzawa, Tomoko 2005. *The Invention of World Religions: How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
McCutcheon, Russell T. 1997. *Manufacturing Religion: the Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
—2003. *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric.* London and New York: Routledge.
McGhee, Derek 2013. Responding to the post-9/11 challenges facing 'post secular societies': critical reflections on Habermas's dialogic solutions. *Ethicities* 13(1): 68–85.
McMullin, Ernan 2008. Academic freedom and competing authorities: historical reflections. In *The Study of Religion and the Training of Muslim Clergy in Europe: Academic and Religious Freedom in the 21th Century*, ed. Willem B. Drees and Sjoerd van Koningsveld, 31–46. Leiden: Leiden University Press.
Milbanks, John 1991. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason.* Oxford: Blackwell.
Modood, Tariq 2011. Is there a crisis in secularism? Essay posted on *The Immanent Frame,* August. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/08/24/is-there-a-crisis-of-secularism-in-western-europe/> (accessed 24.10.2012).
Molendijk, Arie L., and Peter Pels (eds) 1998. *Religion in the Making: the Emergence of the Sciences of Religion.* Leiden: Brill.
Mouffe, Chantal 2006. Religion, liberal democracy, and citizenship. In *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, 318–26. Fordham: Fordham University Press.
Ong, Walter J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologization of the Word.* London and New York: Methuen.
Orsi, Robert 2004. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Roy, Olivier 2007. *The Crisis of the Secular State.* Columbia: Columbia University Press.
Sharp, Eric J. 1986. *Comparative Religion: A History.* London: Duckworth.
Sløk, Camilla 1999. *Religionskritikkens ophør – set i lyset af Niklas Luhmann.* Roskilde: Roskilde University Press.
Smith, Johathan Z. 1978. *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Smith, Wilfred C. 1963. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind.* New York: Macmillan.
Spickard, James 2009. Faith, hope, and regulative ideals: methodological reflectivity in the sociology of religion. Paper presented at the bi-annual ISSR conference, July 2009, Santiago de Compostela, Spain.
Stausberg, Michael 2008. The study of religion(s) in Western Europe (II): institutional developments after World War II. *Religion* 34(4): 305–18.
Sunier, Thijl 2009. Beyond the domestication of Islam: a reflection on research on Islam in European Societies. Lecture given on 27.11.2009 at the Faculty for Social Sciences, The Free University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
Taylor, Charles 2007. *A Secular Age.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
Theissen, Gerd 2004. Forholdet mellem teologi og religionsvidenskab. *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 44: 3–16.
—2006. Introduction: before, around, and beyond the theological-political. In *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, 1–88. Fordham: Fordham University Press.
—2008. Introduction. Why still "religion"? In *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries, 1–98. New York: Fordham University Press.