

## Book Reviews

**Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling:** *Sociology of the Sacred: Religion, Embodiment and Social Change*. London: Sage, 2014, 202 pp.

Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling's book is a convincing attempt to restructure the discussion of secularisation. The book's central argument is that the process of secularisation is ongoing, and depends on the extraordinary power accorded to the bio-political and bio-economic forces active in the world today. These two forces are dominant in the contemporary world, but some religious modalities still thrive.

The authors start by commenting on the secularisation debate. They identify four reactions to the classical secularisation thesis: the 'revitalisation of religion'; 'moderate secularisation'; 'the resurgence of the sacred'; and 'strong secularisation'. Although these are usually seen as incommensurable, the authors point out that there are also convergences pointing to the recognition of the advance of secularisation. Two theoretical dimensions, other-worldliness and social differentiation, are introduced to incorporate these different views, which produce four modalities (socio-religious, transcendent, bio-political, and bio-economic) of the sacred. The authors further emphasise the separation of micro-, meso-, and macro-levels in analysing the secularisation and revitalisation of religion.

The relationships between the four modalities are examined under the headings of intoxication, pain, charisma, eroticism, and habitus. The writers emphasise the embodied base on which these processes habituate, without neglecting an analysis of belief systems, or reflexivity.

The concept of the sacred, according to the writers, is usually seen as unitary and reflective of religious or quasi-religious processes. In departing from this approach, they develop a model of distinct, competing, and interacting modalities of the sacred. Sacred things are extraordinary manifestations of objects, relationships, and ideas, things that are set apart from the mundane. Thus far the model seems quite similar to Gordon Lynch's notion of competing sacred forms which can be religious or not, as he sets out in *The Sacred in the Modern World* (2012). The difference is that Mellor and Shilling's model is more rigid, based on two theoretical dimensions arising from their reassessment of the secularisation discussions, whereas Lynch focuses on empirical sacred forms, such as 'care for children' or 'Catholic nationalism'.

I think this rigidity is both the strength and the weakness of the model they present: it is most convincing when it restructures the secularisation debate, and the facts seem to support it especially when one considers the current clashes between secularism and (certain) religion(s) in France or Turkey, but

its weakness seems to lie in its inability to consider the nuances of sacralisation. One might question the relevance of either of the theoretical dimensions to certain 'manifestations' of the sacred, such as Lynch's care for children. Mellor and Shilling identify other-worldliness with religion and this-worldliness with the secular. The authors are wedded to these identifications, and criticise such 'anthropologies of secularism' which treat secularism as a competing form of religion (Knott, Franks, Wilson, Lynch), and scholars who seek to analyse 'implicit religion' for failing to notice the different directionalities of the religious and the secular. At this point I remain unconvinced: what would happen to the theoretical model if we did not accept the transcendent as the essence of religion, but paid more attention to the constructedness of the boundary between the 'religious' and the 'secular' and its maintenance?

The previously mentioned four modalities of the sacred are anchored to the writings of Durkheim and Weber. The authors maintain that the polarisation of these two classical approaches in terms of secularisation and de-secularisation is invalid: both highlight the emergence of competing religious and secular modalities. The socio-religious modality comes from Durkheim. In his work society is sanctified as religious, and modality is constructed and maintained through an other-worldly cosmology. The commitment of some

forms of Islam to a 'total' religious society is cited as an example of this modality.

The transcendent modality of the sacred emphasises the polarisation between the sacred and profane, but also distinguishes between the temporal and spiritual realms. Unlike the socio-religious modality, it thus contributes to the existence of the secular sphere. This typology of religion is reminiscent of Bruce Lincoln's division between 'maximalist' and 'minimalist' religion in *Holy Terrors* (2003), but also of Craig Martin's elaboration of it in *Capitalizing Religion* (2014, 37), which contends that minimalist Christianity is implicitly capitalist Christianity and has social effects far beyond the religious sphere. I think that Mellor and Shilling capture this well in pointing to certain religious forms such as prosperity Pentecostalism's compatibility with the bio-economic modality.

Ideas concerning the bio-political sacred are based on Weber's analysis of bureaucratisation, Giorgio Agamben's writings on the bare life, and Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power. Bio-political modality is concerned with the rationalisation and management of life. It sacralises sovereignty over life, and it is evident in discussions of euthanasia, genetics, and the risky lifestyles of mothers-to-be. The Nazi death camps present an extreme example. Bio-political modality complicates the experience and expression of this-worldly matters from other-worldly perspectives. Bio-economic

modality is based on Durkheim's and Michel Maffesoli's ideas. It is concerned with the consumerisation of the sacred, and does not seek to control people's actions, disenchant, or confine the other-worldly.

The writers raise the important issue of vagueness in defining the 'sacred', and not paying attention to how the sacred is formed. They build on Hubert and Mauss's theory of sacrifice, which is defined as the setting apart and giving up of something by which that something is made sacred. They suggest that things are not made extraordinary by the making of sacrifices alone, but by 'engaging with sacrifice (via promoting particular forms as valid, prohibiting others as invalid, or even seeking to create a society without sacrifice)' (p. 45). It is therefore relevant to analyse how different modalities are engaged with sacrifice.

Based on Bataille and Girard, the authors compare the socio-religious and transcendent sacred in terms of sacrifice. They use Islamic suicide bombings as an example of the former, and Christianity, with its emphasis on the renunciation of one's desires, of the latter. The bio-political and bio-economic modes tend to be unwilling to sacrifice. In the bio-political mode, in Agamben's terms, everybody becomes sacred (*Homines sacri*), and bare life is appropriated to the state. For the bio-political mode there is no 'outer' existence in relation to which sacrifice might be operationalised. Bio-economic modality is concerned with attachment to economic flows, as opposed to

the 'giving up' of egoistic religious modalities in the wider context of the liberation of goods from social constraints. At this point one thinks of nationalism: should the sacralised imagined nation demanding the blood of its soldiers be considered as belonging to the socio-religious or bio-political modality, or is it a kind of hybrid? The absence of examples of other forms of violence than the socio-religious (and the brief mention of the holocaust in the discussion of the bio-political) leaves one wondering if this stems from the emphasis on the embodied and experiential, i.e. micro-level: is the violence caused by the bio-economic liberation of goods invisible to the (western) consumer because of social differentiation?

From chapter three onwards the embodied, habitual, and experiential aspects of the four modalities are dealt with in more detail, and the way the modalities shape beliefs and practices and affect social change is demonstrated with empirical cases. Chapter three deals with other-worldly and this-worldly intoxication. The idea of socio-religious intoxication comes from Durkheim's collective effervescence, which also directs people's actions. Because of social differentiation shared experiences of intoxication become scarcer. The authors use prosperity Pentecostalism as an example of a transcendent form which adapts itself to the bio-economic environment by recapitulating the Calvinist distinction between the religious and secular. Sport (including fan-

dom) is an example of this-worldly intoxication. The authors make clear that sport is not religious, but that it can be an arena of religious expression. In the bio-political mode intoxications (including illegal drugs but also collective marches, meetings, and worship) are regulated by the state. As collective life is stripped from intoxicants, people are drawn to occasionally dangerous forms of egoistic intoxication. The authors point to sacrificial killing as an example of an intoxicating effervescence which challenges the bio-political by reasserting other-worldly authority.

The fourth chapter deals with pain as a medium of religious experience and the construction of collectivity. In contrast with intoxication, in the West the direction of change has been less ambiguous: towards bio-medicalisation, anaesthetics, and the removal of pain, which is tied to the marginalisation of religion. Shi'a self-flagellation and indifference to pain is the counterpart of Christian doctrines of redemptive suffering and modern western bio-medical practices of pain relief. Christian doctrines are often embraced as medicine fails, but are 'sanctioned normatively only in the context of palliative pain relief' (p. 81) when death becomes inevitable. The authors speculate that this development is connected to the specific religious history of Christianity, with its sensitivity to pain, and a later shift from the attempt to save the world through pain to save it from pain.

The next chapters on charisma and eroticism draw from Weber and Bataille among others, and extend the concepts to cover material forms (aesthetic charisma and fetishism) as well. These chapters offer some interesting new points for the discussion concerning material religion, aesthetics, and branding. The last thematic chapter examines the conditions for a religious habitus in the contemporary world. The contemporary religious habitus is renewed reflexively, and may assume many forms. Reflexivity does not equate with free choice, and it is required even from those who wish to follow traditional religious habits. In the final chapter the authors conclude that transcendent and socio-religious modalities continue to foster the religious habitus, but are constrained by the bio-economic and bio-political modalities.

The theoretical model the book presents is invigorating, and it convincingly reconstitutes the discussions about secularisation. Although rigid, this model opens up many directions, as the thematic chapters demonstrate. This model also recapitulates the distinction between the sociology of the sacred and the sociology of religion (see for example Lynch's book mentioned above, or N. J. Demerath III's article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39:1, 2000). The thematic chapters exemplify the theory well, but the authors might have relied less on classical data in supporting their own theories and used some other examples. Nevertheless, the

book is recommended reading for everyone interested in the debates about secularisation and, of course, the sociology of the sacred.

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