

# Introduction: Theorizing and Studying Religion

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Though religion appears to play a prominent role in the contemporary political and cultural landscape of the United States and elsewhere, relatively few geographers are contributing toward a better appreciation of this phenomenon. A 2001 review of the field countered earlier charges of incoherence by noting particular strengths in geographic research on religion, and more recent publications by geographers have appeared, but the overall picture has not yet matched the strong wave of media treatment and popular interest in religion. A basic question is whether religion really matters in the world today. This question has been addressed in a highly prominent recent debate over secularization theory, which raises important implications for the relevance of geography and suggests the need for both theoretical and empirical contributions. The articles in this theme section comprise the contributions of five geographers toward theorizing and studying religion. Our broad intent is to reinvigorate discourse among geographers on religion, and suggest the important contribution geographers can make to a vibrant and important scholarly conversation. *Key Words:* *geography, religion, secularization, theory.*

## Background: Geography and Religion

The prominence of religion in the contemporary American cultural and political landscape is staggering. When questioned whether he consulted former president George H.W. Bush before ordering the war in Iraq, President Bush replied, “He is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength; there is a higher Father that I appeal to.” Many analysts trace the division of votes in both the 2000 and 2004 U.S. presidential elections not to political party, economic class, or geographical region, but to religion. Pronouncements of American religious leaders on gay marriage and abortion, reports of the increasing diversification of American religion set against the growing strength of evangelical and Pentecostal movements in the United States and worldwide—and certainly Mel Gibson’s controversial *The Passion of the Christ*, one of the biggest-selling American movies of 2004, coupled with the apocalyptic *Left Behind* pop-religion book series, which has sold more than 60 million copies to date—offer convincing proof of religion’s potent status in the United States. Though the United States may be a special case, as proponents of exceptionalism suggest (Zelinsky 2001), religious identity and institutions weave through a great deal of today’s news in many parts of the world.

Where are geographers in the midst of this massive phenomenon? The unfortunate answer is that, for the most part, we are not to be found. An important reason

is the ambiguous relationship between geography and religion. Human geography texts usually include a chapter or section on religion (though cf. Kong 2001, 211), summarizing some of the main areas of interest among geographers: spatial patterns and distributions at global and regional scales; origin and diffusion of religious beliefs, practices, and institutions; sacred places and landscapes; and the impact of religion on geographically significant behavior including population growth, environmental alteration, and political conflict (Park 1994). A glance at geography syllabi suggests the presence of religion in cultural, demographic, developmental, environmental, political, even economic geography courses. Viewed from the perspective of teaching, at least, religion seems to enjoy a secure foothold in the discipline.

Yet there is disagreement as to whether geographical research has seriously included religion, for despite a long history of scholarly interest in geographical dimensions of religion (Kong 1990), the field has been found to be “a diverse and fragmented endeavor within geography” (Stump 1986, 1), and “in disarray for lack of a coherent definition of the phenomenon it seeks to understand” (Tuan 1976, 271). In a more recent review, however, Lily Kong has disputed such pejorative assessments, maintaining that religion has “attracted significant attention in the last decade within geography” (Kong 2001, 211), and integrating recent scholarly work by geographers under the broad theme of the politics and poetics of religious place, identity, and community.

Kong's argument is buttressed by the burgeoning of related professional efforts, such as the Geography of Religions and Belief Systems specialty group of the Association of American Geographers.

Since Kong's 2001 review, religion has occasionally surfaced in geographical journals, notably including a themed section in *Social and Cultural Geography* (Holloway and Valins 2002). It has been considered in cases ranging from the African diaspora in Brazil (Carney and Voeks 2003) to the Indian diaspora in South Africa (Landy, Maharaj, and Mainet-Valleix 2004), from missionary perspectives on climate (Endfield and Nash 2002) to indigenous and scientific perspectives on sacred space (Wainwright and Robertson 2003) to a nineteenth-century religion scholar's perspectives on ritual sacrifice in the Arabian peninsula (Livingstone 2004).

In spite of these important recent efforts by geographers, religion has by no means reached the prominence accorded to it in the popular press over the past several years. There have, for instance, been few books on religion published by geographers in recent times (for an exception, see Stump 2000). And outside of the relatively small number of geographers actually doing research on religion, it is hard to find evidence that the phenomenon is on the discipline's radar screen. Consider, for instance, a 2002 article on the future of geography by a senior spokesperson, who writes passionately of geography's increased relevance in recent years, yet fails to mention religion even in the context in which it has achieved considerable notoriety: "If nothing else, the events of September 11 and after have made clear that ignorance of the world is no excuse. Geographical knowledge is crucial. . . . These events have also underlined the need for producing new forms of ethic that will allow for peaceful co-existence on equal terms. And the literature on post-colonialism . . . is particularly useful here" (Thrift 2002, 294).

The literature on postcolonialism is indeed a necessary ingredient in building a more peaceful and equitable world, but it is by no means sufficient. What about religion? Does it seem rather far-fetched or old-fashioned to consider that some of the major challenges (as well as opportunities) in achieving this desirable end come from the realm of religion? And would not geographers offer a special voice on these opportunities and challenges given religion's diverse expressions across space, place, and landscape?

## The Desecularization of the World?

No matter what degree of (in)attention has been paid to religion by geographers in recent times, the basic

question is whether religion matters in the world today. If it does, any scholarly accounts of the human condition—including those by geographers—would be incomplete if religion were ignored. As suggested at the outset, at least in the context of the popular media religion matters a great deal. But does it *really* matter, or is it in some sense an epiphenomenon or sentimental throwback? This question lies at the heart of the scholarly debate over secularization.

Secularization theory has witnessed a renaissance of sorts among scholars over the past five years. Secularization theory has roots reaching at least back to those social theories of the nineteenth century that predicted a demise of religion in modern societies, but its formal expression dates back roughly to the 1960s in work by sociologists such as Bryan Wilson (1966). There has been healthy debate over secularization theory since this period (Bruce 1992; Wilson et al. 1993), but nowhere near what has erupted recently. One example is a book edited by Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World* (1999b). This is the same Peter Berger who helped author secularization theory some three decades earlier (e.g., Berger 1967). Berger's current stance is forthright: "The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken" (Berger 1999a, 2).

Equally forthright is the stance of supporters such as Steve Bruce, whose recent book *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Bruce 2002) advances a clarification and defense of secularization theory and a rejoinder to critics. Bruce understands secularization as involving three related processes: (a) the declining influence of religious institutions in nonreligious realms such as the state and economy, (b) the declining social standing of religious institutions in themselves, and (c) the declining importance of religion in the context of individual belief and practice. He argues that secularization was never cast as a universal paradigm, applying to all peoples and places; instead, "it is an account of what has happened to religion in western Europe (and its North American and Australasian offshoots) since the Reformation" (Bruce 2002, 37). In this specific context, and based on empirical evidence—which he considers essential in resolving the debate—Bruce argues that cultural diversity and egalitarianism have indeed ushered in a process of secularization whereby religion becomes largely irrelevant, and individuals hence become not irreligious but indifferent to religion.

The debate over secularization has been given further empirical consideration at the global scale in a major study by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004). Their conclusion is that secularization has accompanied rising levels of existential security in advanced industrial societies, whereas traditional religious beliefs and practices are still strong in poorer societies, with disturbing implications given the potential for material and ideological clash. Also, there have been careful reexaminations of the concept of secularization itself. One example is the work of Talal Asad (2003), who reconsiders the “secular” as an epistemic category assumed in analyses of secularist political formations in Europe, Islamic societies, and elsewhere. Asad’s argument suggests important religious continuities with these secularist formations, thus further complicating the long-debated notion of secularization as modernity’s break from its past (Löwith 1949; Blumenberg 1966).

Asad’s work bears the crucial implication that this is a conceptual as well as an empirical debate. In the contested cases of the United States and especially of Europe, differences over the relevance of secularization theory often boil down to differences over the concept of religion, where those who argue that secularization is a reality in these countries (e.g., Bruce 2001) typically adopt substantive approaches to religion as particular beliefs (e.g., theism) and practices (e.g., attending religious services). On the other hand, those who approach religion from a broader, functional perspective (e.g., Roof 1999; Luckmann 2003; Heelas and Woodhead 2004) see new forms of sacred practice and spirituality potentially playing as important and diffuse—though more differentiated—a role in Europe and the United States as institutional religion once did.

The implications for geography are significant. It is likely that secularization and sacralization are highly place-dependent, given country-specific and regional differences concerning institutional religion and other salient factors (Dogan 1995; Verweij, Ester, and Nauta 1997). And, as suggested above, scholarly analysis of these contradictory trends in contemporary religion must necessarily attend to both empirical and conceptual complexities. In both of these respects, geographers are eminently qualified to contribute: we revel in place-based comparison, and we enjoy a healthy discussion over the interplay of theory and method.

Yet are we ready to make this contribution? This is the question recently posed by literary theorist Stanley Fish, who claims that religion is the hottest thing on campus these days among students, and then asks: “Are we ready? We had better be, because that is now where the action is. When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a

reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion” (Fish 2005, C1).

## The Essays

The four core papers and afterword in this special theme section offer an important contribution by five geographers toward conceptually retheorizing and empirically studying religion. They are based on the common premise that, at the heart of the discipline’s relative aphasia regarding religion, there is a need to attend to the ways geographers conceptualize and analyze such a complex terrain. Each paper includes both general theoretical concerns and specific recommendations for the scholarly study of religion. The first two core papers lean especially toward theory, and the latter two lean more toward empirically-based analysis. Adrian Ivakhiv’s lead article reexamines what is meant by religion and the sacred, then proposes that they be considered as particular ways of distributing significance across geographic spaces. Michael Ferber considers the thorny question of the relationship between religion and reality, drawing on critical realism to suggest how differences between insider (emic) and outsider (etic) views may be negotiated. Julian Holloway applies an interpretive analysis of nineteenth-century spiritualism and the séance to argue for a redirection toward embodiment and affect in our conceptualization of religion. Jim Proctor applies recent survey and interview results to link institutional religion with nature, science, and the state as major sources of moral and epistemic authority in contemporary societies. Finally, Anne Buttner provides an Afterword comparing these four contributions, and offering broad reflections on geography and religion.

We hope that in some small way these papers promote a reinvigorated discourse among geographers on religion, and suggest the theoretical and empirical contribution geographers can make to a vibrant and important scholarly conversation.

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