3
RELIGION AND SOCIETY

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In what ways does the interaction between religion and society shape political parties, in terms of their voters’ preferences, culture and programmes? Broad questions about the relationship between religion, society and politics have often been answered using theories of secularisation and modernisation, but as this is the topic of Steve Kettell’s chapter in the current volume (Chapter 4), we shall instead focus on mechanisms other than those generally considered by secularisation theory. Nonetheless, because of the centrality of this theory to the field, we shall first locate the position developed here in relation to it.

Likewise, to avoid overlap with Kettell’s chapter, which focuses on European Christian Democracy, Islamist political parties and the Republican Party in the United States, we shall use different cases: from England, Northern Ireland, Denmark and India. These represent respectively: a highly secularised case, yet still marked by religion-related cleavages (Tilley 2014); a mixed Catholic–Protestant case, where religion is widely regarded as a key marker of ethnicity and sectarian identities (Mitchell 2005); a Lutheran Protestant case, in some ways highly secularised, but where religion arguably still plays a key role in defining national identity which can be mobilised by populist nationalist parties; and a Hindu majority society that has seen the rise to electoral dominance of a party ‘which seeks to establish the primacy of Hindu identity’ (Flåten 2017: 1). Together, these cases illustrate eight mechanisms through which religion impacts on political parties, under a range of conditions.

Religion, society and secularisation: some positioning comments

Kettell’s chapter describes some dimensions and processes associated with secularisation, outlines some counter arguments and responses, then highlights the diversity of secularisation processes while endorsing Norris and Inglehart’s (2012) version of the theory, which draws on World Values Survey (WVS) data. This holds that religion declines not as a direct result of social change but rather of ‘existential security’ partly contingent on it; security tends to increase with modernisation, as humanity’s control over the natural environment, manufacturing capacity and distribution of welfare improves, which is reflected in the declining importance of religion as societies transition from agrarian to industrial to post-industrial conditions. There are, however, exceptions to this trend, as countries as diverse as Brazil, Russia and South Africa show continuous increases in
religious participation throughout the period for which WVS data is available — as does our case study country India from the early 1990s (WVS 2016).

Furthermore, it should be noted that by making security (a psychological state) and not modernisation (a social process) primary in shaping religion’s importance, Norris and Inglehart sever the direct link between religion and modernisation that is central to the secularisation paradigm as generally understood (Tschan nen 1991). Thus, if conditions other than modernisation impact on human security (like terrorism or eco-disaster — or inequalities and violent crime, in the case of our three global exceptions), the trend towards religion’s declining significance may be reversed. Additionally, it will be argued here that at least some modernisation processes (here, communications change) may favour religion’s reproduction. Kettell’s chapter then considers three cases, each of which shows a declining trajectory for religion’s influence on political parties. Thus, European Christian Democrats have been ‘forced to downplay their sense of religious identity to conform to … an increasingly secularised environment’, Islamist political parties have undergone a process of ‘internal secularisation’ and, through his partisan mobilisation of White Evangelical support, Trump has inadvertently fuelled secularisation by accelerating religious disaffiliation.

Here we shall raise further questions about the conceptualisation of secularisation in this account, outline European cases which suggest that even against a background of declining religious participation religion can continue to shape politics in a variety of ways, examine the Indian case to suggest that some forms of structural change favour some kinds of religious reproduction, with implications for political parties, and finally consider evidence which questions the likely direction of travel (towards greater global security, and hence declining influence of religion on politics) indicated by Norris and Inglehart.

Kettell’s chapter describes the dynamics of secularisation as shaped by several related factors. First, ‘scientific and technological advances undermine religious claims about the nature of reality’. Here, sociologists of religion tend to be careful to distinguish between the effects of intellectual arguments between religion and science and the cumulative effects of rationalisation, ‘the pursuit of technically efficient means of pursuing this worldly ends’ (Bruce and Wallis 1992: 14), as rationalised specialist systems (medical, bureaucratic, educational, etc.) come to shape more and more of human interaction with the environment. They see rationalisation and not intellectual defeat as a source of religion’s declining influence. Furthermore, even rationalisation is called into doubt by Norris and Inglehart, who claim that they ‘can rule out the Weberian argument … that belief in science and technology has undermined faith in the magical and metaphysical’ (2012: 67), because:

Societies with greater faith in science also often have stronger religious beliefs … The publics in many Muslim societies apparently see no … contradictions between believing that scientific advances hold great promise for the future of humanity and that they have faith in common tenets of spiritual belief, such as the existence of heaven and hell. (Norris and Inglehart 2012: 67)

This positive co-existence of faith in science and religion relates to a further characteristic of secularisation described in Kettell’s chapter, namely that ‘processes of functional differentiation lead to religious provision in areas such as health, education and welfare becoming supplanted by specialised secular agencies’. In practice, however, anthropologists examining the impact of such developments sometimes find that instead of being ‘supplanted’, religions functionalise within specialised modern systems, both at a discursive and organisational level. For example, in Putting Islam to Work Starrett argues that in Egyptian school textbooks:
Functionalization occurs without the desacralisation of the material … Naturalistic and materialistic explanations coexist with supernatural ones, for Muslims perceive the two as non-contradictory … Since God is concerned with the welfare of the Muslim community, the presumptions of Islam are not only beneficial, but manifestly rational.

(1998: 153)

A parallel functionalisation of religion in school textbooks – in this case Hinduism – has also been observed in India (Flåten 2017). More broadly, religious organisations have become major providers of health care, welfare and international aid in many contexts worldwide (Mavelli and Wilson 2016). This matters in the context of the relationship between religion and political parties, because when religion is seen as relevant to addressing practical day to day issues, its attractiveness as an authority or resource for political parties is enhanced.

Kettell’s chapter states that a further proposed mechanism of secularisation is that ‘multiculturalism and social diversity increasingly relativise religious worldviews and challenge notions of universal truth’. It is not clear whether multiculturalism here refers to policy responses to the cultural diversity produced by globalisation, which seek to incorporate minorities by recognising their cultural backgrounds and actively attempting to accommodate them (Herbert 2013: 8) or has the looser descriptive sense of ‘cultural diversity’. But either way it is not evident that either ‘policy multiculturalism’ nor the sheer fact of cultural diversity in practice undermines religious belief. On the contrary, policy multiculturalism arguably enables the reproduction of religious culture by supporting institutions (whether by co-funding places of worship, permitting distinctive religious dress or teaching diverse religious traditions in schools) which enable its intergenerational transmission. Likewise, large data sets like the WVS show no overall relationship between societal religious diversity and religious participation; if anything, comparison of Europe (where state-church religious monopolies have been common) and America (denominationally diverse from its early history, and religiously due to many waves of immigration) would suggest diversity is rather positively linked to religious strength; but there are cases on either side.

Kettell’s chapter also proposes that ‘globalisation and the emergence of an individualised consumer culture disrupt traditional community structures and erode the role of religion as an agent of social cohesion’. However, there are many cases globally and cross-culturally of religion prospering under conditions of consumer culture (Smith 1998; Izberk-Bilgin 2012), while in diverse societies there is much evidence that urban and transnational religious institutions function as agents of social cohesion (Martin 2002; Werbner 2004). Finally, in its outline of secularisation dynamics Kettell’s chapter argues that ‘once underway, processes of intergenerational decline cause each generation to become progressively less religious than the last, putting religion on an inexorably downward path’. Yet, even in Western Europe where secularisation is most advanced, demographers argue that higher religious retention levels together with a younger age structure and higher fertility amongst ethnic minorities means that if current trends continue the ‘desecularisation point’ is fast approaching, where losses from historic denominations become outweighed by growth in minority religions, meaning that the religiously active proportion of the population will begin to rise again (Kaufmann et al. 2012).

In short, none of the dynamics associated with secularisation necessarily point in that direction when examined at a global scale; not even in Western Europe where secularisation is most marked, given demographic trends. In this context, we may at least expect religion to remain available as a potential resource for political mobilisation. Indeed, in the UK context even the most committed secularisation theorist (Bruce 2016) has recently argued that the different trajectories of religious reproduction by ethnicity point to the likely continuing political relevance of religion as a marker of ethnic difference, and potentially conflict; when religion becomes...
‘something other people do’ the potential for divisive mobilisation is clear, and apparent in populist political parties across Europe, of which more below. However, religion also impacts on political parties through other mechanisms, even in highly secular parts of Europe.

**Religion as legacy: ‘frozen cleavages’ and party politics in England**

Across Britain, where decline in religious participation amongst the majority population has occurred over many generations (Bruce 2016: 613), religion has remained ‘consistently important in predicting voters’ party choices’ (Tilley 2014: 907). Tilley argues that in the English case this is not because of a strong relationship between religion, class and political affiliation, nor because party policies resonate with specific religious values, but rather because of patterns of party support established in the early twentieth century along religious lines continue to be transmitted intergenerationally, even when religious participation is not. Hence, ‘divisions based on religion may continue to structure voting behaviour even after the issues that linked parties to particular religious groups have faded away’ (Tilley 2014: 910).

Even though intergenerational transmission is not always successful, these ‘frozen cleavages’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) may ‘allow the divisions that characterized the political world of people’s parents, grandparents and beyond to continue to shape the way in which people choose political parties today’ (Tilley 2014: 911). Thus, in England support for Labour remained a fairly constant 20 points higher amongst Catholics than amongst practising Anglicans between 1962 and 2012 (Tilley 2014: 917), a difference which remains when controlling for social characteristics and ideology (Tilley 2014: 919). This English Catholic tendency to vote left is particularly striking, given the Catholic church’s association with social conservatism and Labour with socially progressive causes, and contrasts with Catholic voter orientations in every other Europe country (Tilley 2014: 921).

The association remains even amongst non-practising Catholics, whereas the Anglican tendency to vote Conservative is much stronger for attenders. Tilley links the enduring and counter-intuitive association between Catholicism and English Labour to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century origins of many Catholics in Irish immigration, and the efforts of Labour during that period to recruit Catholics into its growing movement. For Conservatives, he highlights links between the party of the establishment and the established church, which is more dependent on reinforcement through attendance than that for minorities, because it has a less central protective function (Tilley 2014: 923). Plausibility is lent to Tilley’s claim that parental socialisation is the primary mechanism of transmission here, both by the stability of denominational affiliation amongst English Christians: ‘As … very few people change their denomination from their parents, other than to give up religion, someone’s religious denomination tells us in what kind of political household their parents and grandparents were raised’ (Tilley 2014: 923), and by the finding that a substantial part of the difference between Catholic support for Labour and Anglican support for the Conservatives disappears when parental voting preference is controlled for – in contrast to structural variables (Tilley 2014: 922).

The centrality of this legacy or frozen cleavage mechanism to explaining voter preferences in England overall has diminished over time as the proportion of White British and White Irish in the population has itself fallen. Nonetheless, in 2010 practising Anglicans still accounted for 11 percent of the English population, Catholics for 12 percent, so between them nearly a quarter. Thus, while these findings do not exactly support Tilley’s claim that English voters “‘do religion’ after all’, they do show how the legacy of religion–politics alliances can continue to exert significant electoral effects, even generations later. In our next case, these alliances remain much more powerfully present.
Religion, society and political parties in Northern Ireland: five mechanisms of influence

In much literature on politics and society in Northern Ireland, religion is seen a significant ethnic marker – one characteristic marking the boundary between Nationalist and Unionist communities – but not as contributing much to the substance of politics, either in terms of political culture or political platforms (Ganiel 2007). However, several recent accounts show that Catholic and Protestant institutions, identities and in the Protestant case theologies have a significant impact on political parties (Mitchell 2005; Mitchell and Ganiel 2011), which can be grouped into five distinct though related mechanisms. First, religion plays a role through links between the leadership of churches and political parties, most obviously in the case of the Rev. Ian Paisley, founder of the Democratic Unionist Party, but more generally, ‘Protestant churches have many representatives within unionist political parties’. For Catholics these links are mostly constituted by delegations ‘sent to key processes of political consultation [where] they can be seen to-ing and fro-ing from parliament buildings in full clerical dress’ (Mitchell 2005: 39).

Second, religion functions as ‘the dominant ethnic marker, maintained through segregated education, marriage, housing patterns and social networks’ (Ganiel 2007: 1). Despite two decades of attempts to promote integration between the communities, with notable successes in terms of the creation of shared public spaces, access to city centres and out of town facilities, Northern Ireland remains a deeply segregated society (McAtackney 2015). Third, religion, especially Catholicism, plays a role in the construction of communities – without any intention of exclusivity, simply by providing shared rituals and access to spaces within which they take place, the Catholic church builds a sense of belonging and group identification that does not include Protestants (Mitchell 2005: 69–90). Divided into multiple denominations, Protestant churches do not perform the same role.

However, Protestantism is more influential in the fourth and fifth mechanisms. Fourth, Protestant religion provides cultural tropes that feed into vernacular identities through which Protestants distinguish themselves from Catholics, such as ‘liberty, the “honest Ulsterman,” and anti-Catholicism’ (Ganiel 2007: 1). Fifth, particularly amongst Evangelical Protestants, theological concepts such as the ‘faithful remnant’, ‘chosen people’ and ‘the end times’ feed into Unionist politics, especially the DUP. However, alongside these polarising concepts, amongst the religious active both Protestant and Catholic, theologies of peace and ecumenism have also had some influence (Liechty and Clegg 2001; Mitchell and Ganiel 2011).

But how relevant are these mechanisms in other contexts, beyond similarly divided societies such as Bosnia, Cyprus and Israel? In a thoughtful conclusion to her article ‘Is Northern Ireland Abnormal?’, Mitchell writes:

> It might be that through marking out boundaries, religion actively helps constitute what it means to belong to a particular community. It may give meanings and values to the boundary. These are integrally human processes and are at work in peaceful pluralist, as well as deeply divided, societies. The point is that group formation and boundary maintenance are a universal part of social relationships and as Britain becomes increasingly multicultural and religiously plural, it is reasonable to ask how religion may play a role in these processes of identification.

(2005: 251)

This passage provides an interesting frame through which to view a phenomenon that has been increasingly visible across Europe since the financial crisis of 2008, and especially since the spike
in refugees entering Europe in 2015–16 – the use of Christianity and its symbols and history as part of a European identity, sometimes presented as a reason for European hospitality to refugees regardless of religion (Ralston 2017), but more prominently in the media and more relevantly for party politics, as in need of defence against Islam as the (at least supposed, and often actual) religion of many refugees and other migrants.

**Christian identity and the European populist right: boundary-marking, vicarious religion and the Danish People’s Party (DPP)**

_Folkekirken_ [the Lutheran Evangelical Church] is the Danish people’s church. Christianity has for centuries been upheld in Denmark and is inseparable from people’s lives. The importance of Christianity has been immense and shapes the Danish people’s way of life. It has throughout the ages been the guide of the people.

_(Danish People’s Party Principles 2019: 3, author’s translation)_

In Denmark the religion of Islam … provides the DPP with an identity.

_(Hellström and Hervik 2014: 449)_

_[In 2016] Slovakian, Polish, Bulgarian, and Cypriot governments issued statements that they would only accept Christian refugees as Muslims would threaten their identity._

_(Ralston 2017: 23)_

As Brubaker argues, across Europe ‘references to Christianity have become increasingly central to national-populist rhetoric in the last decade or so’ (2017: 1198), arguably powerful enough to lead (or at least be deployed to legitimise) European governments abandoning their obligations under international law to provide safe-haven for refugees regardless of religion (Ralston 2017: 23). Populism here is understood as polarising forms of popular political movement characterised by:

- a twofold opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’: a vertical opposition between ‘the people’ and a corrupt, self-serving, out-of-touch political, economic, or cultural ‘elite’; and a horizontal opposition between ‘the nation’ and groups, institutions, or forces that are stigmatised as non-national or characterized as threatening the nation from within or from without.

_(Brubaker 2017: 1205)_

The broader relationship between religion and populism is a significant political phenomenon, but here we are concerned more narrowly with mechanisms linking religion to political parties, which we will examine using the case of the _Dansk Folkeparti_ [Danish People’s Party, DPP], which mobilises Christian identity, especially against a supposed Islamic threat.

The DPP was founded in 1995. It had a close relationship with the governing centre right wing coalition from 2001 to 2011, entered opposition from 2011 to 2016, then the governing coalition in 2016 with 21 percent of the vote. Analysts have drawn attention to the role of leaders of the party as discursive entrepreneurs influential in altering ‘tone of the debate’ (_tonen i debatten_) on immigration in Denmark during this period:
The ‘tone of the debate’ has become a catch-all term in the Danish debate for … the brutal directness of the language used in representing issues of the ethnic minorities and refugees in Denmark. An example is the statement by Søren Espersen of the DPP: ‘We have a sharp tone and we say whatever the hell we want’. (Hellström and Hervik 2014: 451)

The key question to address here is whether the mobilisation of Christianity by populist political parties is best understood through the category of an ‘ethnic marker’ introduced above, in which religion coincides with and hence is used to mark a boundary, but contributes little to the substance of politics, or whether the invocation of Christian identity taps into deeper roots, and hence may expose other mechanisms through which religion’s role in society influences party politics. The DPP is an interesting case, because measured by conventional indicators such as church attendance Danish religiosity is extremely low; yet in other ways Danish Christian roots seem to run deep.

In his analysis, Brubaker takes the first view in relation to North-Western Europe, and hence Denmark:

The Christianity invoked by the national populists of Northern and Western Europe … is not a substantive Christianity; it is a ‘secularized Christianity-as-culture’ … a civilizational and identitarian ‘Christianism’. It is a matter of belonging rather than believing, a way of defining ‘us’ in relation to ‘them’ … Crudely put, if ‘they’ are Muslim, then ‘we’ must, in some sense, be Christian. But that does not mean that ‘we’ must be religious.

(2017: 1199)

In support, Brubaker cites the low attendance at regular religious services amongst Protestant North Europeans (about 5 percent; 2017: 1199), then extrapolates from this to the wholesale de-institutionalisation of Christianity in North West Europe:

It is precisely the ongoing erosion of Christianity as doctrine, organization, and ritual that makes it easy to invoke Christianity as a cultural and civilizational identity, characterized by putatively shared values that have little or nothing to do with religious belief or practice.

(2017: 1199)

In one sense, Denmark more than exemplifies the type: regular church attendance in Denmark is even lower than the North-West European average, at 2–3 percent (Nielsen 2012: 3). However, in the Danish case this does not necessarily mean that Christian organisation or ritual has eroded, nor that Christian (and specifically Lutheran) identity is meaningful to Danes only in defining what they are not, i.e. in contrast to Muslims. Consider Nielsen’s comment in Islam in Denmark: The Challenge of Diversity, that if one is not of Lutheran heritage:

in the Danish context, the institutional structures are such … that it is difficult to avoid being reminded that one is somehow different. Although one of the most secular societies in Europe, Danish society and institutions are thoroughly impregnated with Lutheran Christianity. Normally less than 3 percent of the population is in church on Sundays … [but] 80 percent are members of the state-sponsored Lutheran church.

(Nielsen 2012: 3–4)
Indeed, the latest figures available show that roughly two-thirds of live births in Denmark were followed by parish church baptisms in 2018 (41,456 of 62,488), while even more 14-year-olds underwent confirmation (47,198, Statistics Denmark 2019). In this context, consider further this comment of an ethnic Danish convert to Islam interviewed in 2016: ‘There was the episode with my cousins, who responded by saying, well, then you are not a part of my family now – you are not my flesh and blood anymore because you converted’ (‘Amina’, ethnic Danish convert to Islam, in Herbert and Hansen 2018: 4).

This reaction is not an isolated case: another convert refers to himself as no longer ‘culturally Danish’ due to his conversion, while expressing his wish to show to fellow Danes that ‘he [remains] a good person. He is still a human being’ (Herbert and Hansen 2018: 4), suggesting a sense of having traversed a fundamental boundary. Indeed, an earlier study of ethnic converts concluded that conversion is commonly regarded by ethnic Danes as a change of ethnicity: ‘Danes who convert to Islam are seen as people who have become “the other”, and thus are considered members of the immigrant minority population in Denmark’ (Gudrun Jensen 2008: 390, emphasis added).

Thus, while Brubaker construes Danish ‘belonging without believing’ as ‘not being religious’, these examples suggest a more complex picture – even if most Danes are not regular churchgoers, their identification with Christianity is closely bound up with their sense of ethnic identity, to the extent that conversion is viewed as a change of ethnicity. Furthermore, Danes widely participate in life-cycle rituals and pay the (not inconsiderable) church tax:

The most striking aspect about the Nordic countries is the relatively small number of people who decide to ‘contract out’ of this system. Some do, but most continue tangibly to support their churches (the financial contribution is not negligible), despite the markedly low levels of both churchgoing and orthodox religious belief in this part of the world. Why do they do this? One assumes that they hope these institutions will continue in existence for a wide variety of reasons.

(Davie 2010: 266)

How can we best make sense of this? While Brubaker reads the mobilisation of religion by ‘NWE national populism’ as ‘entirely secular’, such a reading does not sit comfortably with the evidence presented, at least on behalf of the population who are mobilised; while political leaders may instrumentally use religion, this evidence suggests that in doing so they tap into something that runs deep, something better described as a form of ‘attachment’ than ‘nominal membership’.

Through her concept of ‘vicarious religion’ Davie offers a more subtle interpretation of what may be going on, both in Denmark (combination of high participation in membership rituals and national identification but low regular attendance, typical of Scandinavia), and in contexts where membership rituals too may be in sharp decline (like England), but where historic churches continue to play some significant role both in national life when national tragedies or moral crises occur, and in parallel events at the individual and family level. Davie defines ‘vicarious religion’ as ‘the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing’ (Davie 2007: 22).

Despite limited attendance and low levels of orthodox belief, the institution, life rituals and identity of the Lutheran church remains significant for many, indeed most Danes, judging by some indicators of membership – and by the powerful emotions that conversion to another religion elicits for some. Doubtless, the latter has been heightened by politicians and media who have between them produced a hostile tone of public debate around immigration and Islam. So, there is instrumental use and opportunism here; but there is also something else being accessed. In Mitchell’s terms, this is religion...
structuring politics by ‘community building’ of a specific kind – a national, ethnic community (whatever the official doctrines of the church).

Indeed, in the light of the experience of Danish converts to Islam of crossing an ethnic boundary, the payment and participation in rites of passage may in practice function as the dues and rites of an ethnic religion (again, regardless of church doctrine). This may be mobilised both to produce both high levels of solidarity (enabling, possibly, support for high taxes to maintain a strong welfare state), and powerful rejection of others who may (or may be represented as) threatening to it (see also Jørgensen et al. 2016 on welfare chauvinism in Denmark). It is this sense of identity and belonging that the DPP accesses in its appeals not to Christianity in general, but the ‘people’s church’. Religion here is not, as in Bruce’s (2016: 628) characterisation of the British majority, ‘something other people do’ but ‘part of who we are’ – a kind of repository of Danish national identity.

So far, our cases have been drawn from North-West Europe, the global region where decline in religious participation is most marked and seen by many as exceptional (Davie 2002). Our final example is from India, where regular religious participation is much higher, rising from 32 percent in 2001 to 45 percent in 2014, according to WVS data (WVS 2016). Hinduism, the religious tradition of 80 percent of Indians, features distinctive worship practices, including a strong emphasis on the visual. A major development globally in the last few decades has been in media technologies and culture, especially towards more visual and interactive forms. How have these changes impacted on Hinduism, and what are the implications for the religion’s relationship to political parties?

**Media culture, religion and politics: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India**

Founded in 1980, the BJP [India People’s Party] has been described as ‘an identity political party, which seeks to establish the primacy of Hindu identity’ (Flåten 2017: 1). In Brubaker’s terms, it is a right-wing national populist party. After struggling to establish itself as a major contender in the 1980s, it emerged as India’s largest party in the 1996 elections, and today (February 2019) it is the world’s largest political party, measured by primary membership. Though it was unable to form a durable coalition in 1996, as the major party in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) it won further elections in 1998 and 1999, remaining in office until 2004. In opposition from 2004 to 2014, the NDA won a landslide victory in the 2014 elections, and is currently the dominant political force in India, also running 16 of India’s 29 states. In its visual repertoire, the BJP draws heavily on Hindu imagery, and has sought to change the way Indian history is taught to reflect views more aligned to Hindu nationalism (Flåten 2017). While the BJP’s rise to power has multiple causes – not least how it has succeeded in extending its appeal to groups who have a subordinate place in its ideology (Thachil 2014), we focus here on one aspect of the BJP’s mobilisation which may give insight into further mechanisms through which changes in religion and society may effect political parties – its success in tapping into a ‘Hinduized visual regime’ (Rajagopal 2001: 283) and related discourse, transmitted across multiple media platforms which have followed in quick succession since the late 1980s.

Early media theorists (Benjamin 1978 [1935]; McLuhan 1964) believed the potency of religious symbols would be diluted or undermined through their mass mediation, a view consistent with secularisation theory. However, evidence from many global regions and cultural contexts now shows that increasing the circulation of image and voice through their mass reproduction in many cases enhances their potency, as well as increasing their public presence (Ginsburg et al. 2002; Meyer and Moors 2006). For example, Pinney (2002) analysed the use Hindu devotees make of postcard reproductions of deities, which serve as a focus for domestic devotion. Pinney found that reproduction magnifies the perceived value of the original:
The mass dissemination of postcard reproductions serves to reinvest originals with a new aura. The original artwork now comes to embody what the reproduction lacks and must be enclosed in shrine-like security structures to protect them from the admiring and sometimes hateful, gestures of their devotees.

(Pinney 2002: 356)

Pinney argues that darshan, the core Hindu devotional practice of ‘eye contact’ with the deity achieved through sight of the image (murti) and reproduced in Hindi cinema and photography, offers an example of a cultural practice which taps into an optical unconscious to create a powerful bodily aesthetic sensibility. While it is culturally specific, darshan is ‘not strikingly unlike a whole range of culturally diverse practices that stress mutuality and corporeality in spaces as varied as those of religious devotion and cinematic pleasure’, practices that Pinney describes as ‘cortexhetics’ (embodied aesthetics; 2002: 359). Indeed, other commentators such as Jain (2007) have gone further than Pinney, arguing that the interaction of Hindu conceptions of the efficacy of images, modern notions of the public sphere and mass media practices results in the mutual transformation of all three (Jain 2007). The emotional intensity developed through such engagement is not only confined to private devotion, but also may find public and political expression, from the mob storming of a power station when the transmission of an episode of a popular Hindu religion epic was interrupted, to its more organised channelling by the BJP (Rajagopal 2001).

Rajagopal argues that the BJP benefited from the creation of an India-wide Hinduised visual regime, brought about through the creation of a national television audience in the late 1980s, and especially through the broadcast of the religious epics the Ramayana from January 1987 to September 1990, and later the Mahabharata. This made religious imagery that had previously been largely regionally defined nationally available, and crucially influenced the representation of gods in commercial advertising, which in turn reinforced the trend towards national convergence. The narrative of the Ramayana also resonated with the BJP’s message of Hindu unity and purity, by offering a model of a past golden age in which ‘authoritarianism’ and ‘complete mutual recognition between rulers and subjects’ were miraculously combined (Rajagopal 2001: 149). This was unintentional – the producers worked for the secular state broadcaster Doordarshan, closely linked to the rival Congress Party. Rajagopal’s argument concerning the impact of these developments on the popularity of the BJP works on two levels. First, the availability of imagery and narrative on a national basis which resonated with the BJP’s ideology, and which they could draw on in political advertising. Second, these events precipitated a crisis in the Indian public sphere, which also created opportunities for the BJP. In particular, it exposed the narrow social base of Indian secularism: ‘If secularism had been declared by state fiat, the power of new communications brought home the fact that secularism existed … as largely the sign and exercise of membership in a cultural élite’ (Rajagopal 2001: 149).

Rajagopal highlights the ambivalent effects of the broadening of the Indian public sphere through the advent of television and video to which the circulation of Hindu imagery has been central, and the BJP the principle political beneficiaries – on the one hand, participation has been extended to a wider range of social groups; on the other, the terms of debate have coarsened and polarised. This process has been further radicalised by the next (2.0) wave of media technologies, which enable Hindu nationalist volunteers to ‘archive’ – assemble facts, figures and treatises as weapons in an information war. For example, Udupa (2016) highlights the activities of users of ‘Indiafacts.com’, a website with an avowed mission to ‘act as a watchdog by closely monitoring anti-India and anti-Hindu propaganda, distortion and slander’, which include:
targeting journalists who are critical of Hindu nationalism or seen as insufficiently respectful of Hindu traditions owing to their professed liberal secularism ... gathering texts, commentaries, and arguments that portray the fecund repertoire of Hinduism as the civilizational essence of India, and inserting them aggressively into online media through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and hundreds of websites.

(Udupa 2016: 213)

Arguably, such practices (though not necessarily for national populist ends) are a key aspect of the reproduction of religion in intensively mediatised contemporary societies, and, contra secularisation theory, reveal a process of structural change (the continual development and diffusion of new, increasingly multi-sensory and interactive media forms) which tend to increase the public presence and potentially social and political significance of religion symbols and discourses (see Herbert 2011 for a fuller theory of religious publicisation). The mechanisms through which this process impacts on the mobilising capacity of the BJP are both direct and indirect. Directly, nationally standardised Hindu imagery and mythical narratives provide cultural resources for the BJP to fashion for their ideological purposes; indirectly, structural changes in the Indian public sphere have helped both by exposing the narrow social base of opposing ideologies and by shifting the terrain of political debate to communicative forms (television and social media) which arguably favour populist forms.

Conclusion

We have identified eight mechanisms by which religion’s influence on society impacts political parties – frozen cleavages; links between religious leaders and political parties; as an ethnic marker; through the construction of communities; through cultural tropes; through theological concepts (for the religiously active); as a repository of national identity; and as an especially potent cultural resource where the transmission of religious symbols and narratives is invigorated by developments in media culture. Looking to the future, we questioned whether structural modernisation necessarily tends to diminish religion’s social significance and hence political potency, as most forms of secularisation theory hold; and whether global conditions of human security are likely to continue to improve with further modernisation and diminish religion’s influence that way, as Norris and Inglehart’s version of the theory holds. Returning to this last point, as well as environmental and terrorism threats, we note that inequalities are growing within most societies (Klasen et al. 2018: 11), a feature associated with many negative developments from rising violence to poorer health (Klasen et al. 2018), both factors that are likely to negatively impact existential security. Under these conditions and given the positive association of religion with fertility (Norris and Inglehart 2012), we anticipate that religion’s global social significance, and hence impact on political parties, will grow over time.

References


