BOOK REVIEWS


In 2008 Phil Zuckerman published *Society without God* (New York: Barnes and Noble). Based on a year’s fieldwork in Denmark and Sweden, that study in the words of the subtitle explored *What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*. These two edited volumes are Zuckerman’s attempt to organise such scholarly interest as there is in atheism and secularity and promote further research and thought. Let me say at the outset that the effort has been well-directed. The twenty-nine essays naturally vary in tone and quality but overall they form an important addition to the sociology of religion and editor and publisher deserve our thanks for bringing this range of material together. Every university library should have copies.

In his introduction Zuckerman draws attention to how little has been written about atheists and secularists considering their number: ‘That sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists have largely neglected the study of secularity is truly remarkable... [when] non-believers in God as a worldwide group come in fourth place after Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in terms of the global ranking of commonly-held belief systems’ (vol. 1, p. ix). Actually I do not find the neglect remarkable. A lot of it can be explained by the logical difficulty of indentifying our subject matter. A failure to believe is not much of a basis for a common identity; a fact that is inadvertently recognised by many of the chapters which study not unbelievers at large but members of organized atheist and secularist groups. And those people are unusual in caring enough about religion to wish to argue with it.

A further inhibition on study is terminological promiscuity. Jack Eller’s discussion of the various meanings of atheism, agnosticism and secularism is careful and enlightening but it does not bring us any closer to a systematic set of terms that would allow scholars to mesh their diverse interests.

Christel Manning’s essay on the impact of atheism and secularity on the family and children challenges the body of work that Christians have produced to support the claim that, true or false, religion is socially beneficial because young people raised in religious households are less prone to drink alcohol, take drugs, being sexually active and drop out of school. Manning makes a good case that atheism and secularism are not bad for one’s children but more thought-provoking were some rather casual remarks in her introduction where she reports, with some sympathy, the wish of non-religious parents to give their children a religious upbringing. ‘Many contemporary secularists are individuals who were themselves raised with religion, and whatever their misgivings or disinterest in religion as adults, they often cherish the memories of
childhood associated with religion’. Apparently, they fear that they will be depriving their children of an important part of their culture if they do not ensure their offspring regularly worship a God they no longer believe in. The way in which many US essayists discuss their subject is a powerful testimony reminder of the power of US religion. Manning herself promises ‘to argue that the impact of atheism and secularity on family and children is complex and not necessarily negative’ (vol. 1, p. 20; emphasis added). As a person with no personal interest in religion raised in a country where less than 10 per cent attends church, I know very few people who would think an absence of religion ‘necessarily negative’ but it is useful to be reminded that the USA is different.

The second volume contains studies of belief and its alternatives in North America, Japan, China, Netherlands, the former USSR and its successor states, the UK, Ghana, Scandinavia, India and the Arab world. Approaches vary considerably but almost all present such statistics on the extent and nature of unbelief as are available. The focus also varies from place. For example in Eller’s study of the Arab World the main concern is not personal irreligiosity (of which there is relatively little) but the public position of religion and its reach. Given the often grand but casual claims for religious revival that are frequently made for the former communist countries, Leontina Hormel’s essay on the USSR is valuable. She explains the policy of the USSR to religio-ethnic groups and looks at the evidence for religious growth since its collapse. She concludes that, despite the inconsistencies in the imposition of state secularity and the apparent failure of the party to convert people to scientific atheism, the vast majority of Russians do seem to have been weaned off the opiate of the masses.

Two of the area studies demonstrate the difficulty of identifying the thing Zuckerman wants us to study. Atheists are identifiable when they are a small minority in an otherwise religious culture and in many respects have the characteristics of an alternative religion. But, as Michael Roemer’s essay on Japan reminds us there is an alternative to the exclusivity of the Abrahamic religions. In Japan we see a pluralism based not on the western model of a truce between competing convictions but on theological nonchalance. Many in Japan disclaim any interest in religion and sound like atheists and secularists but nonetheless perform rituals at Shinto and Buddhist shrines that only make sense if one believes in spirits and in some form of life after death. Another way in which our subject can become opaque is through irrelevance. As Samuel Bagg and David Voas argue, in the UK ‘neither religion nor irreligion plays a large part in daily life’ (vol. 2, p. 107). In that circumstance unbelief is not the mirror image of belief; it is everything else.

Despite my reservations about the homogeneity of unbelievers, I share Zuckerman’s wish to see more empirical research of atheists and secularists and these two volumes of essays are an excellent starting point.

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Bioethics has become increasingly important in our modern society, especially due to technological advances and new possibilities of treatment. In the last years, issues like stem cell research, IVF (In vitro fertilization) and prenatal genetic therapy have been much discussed, not only among ethicist, but also in the public debate. For many people all over the world, religious opinions play an important role for the positions taken in such issues. In Christianity, bioethics has become very important during the last 40–50 years. But we should not forget the fact that there are many other religious traditions, and that the bioethical issues are relevant for all parts of the world.

Therefore, we should appreciate the recently published Norwegian book about bioethics in the world’s religions, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, Professor of Religious Science at the University of Bergen. He is an outstanding expert on religions in India, and his detailed knowledge about Hinduism and Buddhism is visible in the articles he writes on these two religious traditions in the book. As editor, he has also written a short introductory chapter, presenting the issue about bioethics and religions from a general perspective. Jacobsen claims that we often identity «the religious viewpoint» in bioethics with the Christian view, or even with a special religious tradition within Christianity or other religions. In fact, religious viewpoints on bioethical issues vary quite a lot, both between and within the world religions, Jacobsen claims.

The bioethical issues presented in the different articles mainly focus on issues concerning the beginning and ending of human life. Issues like human identity, the moral status of the human embryo, assisted reproduction, prenatal screening and abortion cover the first phase of human life. At the end of human life, issues like voluntary euthanasia, assisted suicide, ending of therapeutic interventions, definitions of death and organ donations are important issues.

Through five chapters these issues are presented within the context of the five great world religions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. The chapter on bioethics in Christianity (Ch. 2) is the longest (83 p, including a long list of references). The author is Prof. Ulla Schmidt, who holds a PhD in theology and is an expert on ethics and religion, including bioethics. She identifies three different dimensions in Christian bioethics. Firstly, Christian institutions and organizations have given several official statements on bioethical issues. Secondly, Churches and other Christian organizations have been involved in practical issues in this field, for instance through health care institution and pastoral care. Thirdly, within academic Christian theology bioethics has become an important field for critical reflection during the last decades. Schmidt herself has chosen to concentrate on the first dimension, examining statements from official church bodies. This means she does not cover all the nuances in the theological discussions about bioethics, but tries to look for typical positions in Christian bioethics as revealed in important statements.

The chapter starts with a more general presentation of the plurality of Christian traditions. Schmidt also reflects on the complex and ambivalent relationship between
Christianity and modernity, and gives a short introduction of the role of ethics within a Christian world view and anthropology, of important ethical concerns, ideals and values in Christian traditions, and of different views of authority and relevant sources within Christian ethics.

Before presenting the different bioethical issues, Schmidt also gives a short presentation of Christian views of health and medicine, showing that there has always been a double perspective on illness and medical treatment. On the one hand, illness should be understood from an eschatological point of view as relative unimportant compared to the eternal blessing. On the other hand illness and suffering should not be idealized, and human life in this world should be seen as created by God, and therefore worthy of care and treatment.

The presentation of the abortion issue starts with a historical perspective. Although ancient philosophy made a distinction between two different stages in the development of the fetus, the church fathers generally viewed abortion as unacceptable for Christians. Also in our time, most churches hold a restrictive position, but there are differences, both with regard to how the moral status of the fetus is defined, and especially when it comes to the difficult question of how to balance absolute ethical rules and situational considerations. There are well known differences between the very restrictive positions within the orthodox and catholic churches and the more flexible attitudes within protestant churches, where the actual circumstances are given more weight. Although Church of Norway has opened up for abortion as a possible solution in severe situation, for example when the health of the women is endangered, or the pregnancy is caused by incest or rape, this church is rather restrictive, compared to some other Lutheran churches, for example Church of Sweden and ELCA).

Not only in the issue of abortion, but in most of the issues covered in Schmidt’s overview, it’s easy to find differences between the churches. In some issues, however, all churches are on the restrictive side, rejecting reproductive cloning and Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD), unless the medical situation is extremely severe. On the other hand, no churches seem to reject xenotransplantation in principle. In the much debated issue of euthanasia, most churches are restrictive, although some churches in principle opens up for the possibility of exceptional cases allowing for emergency measures. Both in this issue and with regard to abortion, many churches are engaged in practical work to ease the situation for those who are involved.

Schmidt’s chapter gives a very systematic presentation of different Christian attitudes to bioethical issues, with a certain emphasis on positions held by Church of Norway. At the end, she discusses the more general aspects of her findings, firstly, the different positions in bioethical issues, secondly, the arguments and concerns behind the church positions, and thirdly, the more general methods and approaches to bioethical issues within Christianity. In her conclusion, she discusses the following question: Do we find a unique way of discussing bioethics in Christianity, or do the churches accommodate in a pragmatic way to the more general attitudes in society? Her answer is that we see a certain ambivalence here, and that church positions are both critical to societal processes and at the same time products of general attitudes in their context.
This balanced view is characteristic, and both from a descriptive and from an analytical point of view Ulla Schmidt presents a valuable contribution in her chapter.

Chapter 3, on bioethics in Islam, written by the Swedish lecturer in Religious Science, Jonas Svensson, is partly based on an earlier publication. It is shorter than Schmidt’s chapter (61 pages), but still detailed enough to present both the fundamental presuppositions for Islamic bioethics and positions in important issues. Also in Islam, there are many different voices in bioethical issues, although the two sources (the Qur’an and sunna) are the obvious starting point for all reflections. Svensson presents the struggle between different spokesmen for Islam (women are seldom active participants in these discussions), and the role of fatwas in bioethical issues. Especially from the 1980’s we have seen an increased interest in bioethics among religious leaders and lay people with medical background, and both groups could benefit from each other’s specific competence.

In a way similar to Schmidt’s chapter, Svensson gives a brief sketch of different ethical traditions within Islam, and of the general view of illness, health and healing as a background for the bioethical discussion. Historically, Islam has played an important role in the development of medical science through persons like Ibn Sina (Latin: Avicenna), who influenced European medical science until the 17th century. There is also another tradition in Islam, underlining the healing power of religious sources. Medical science and religious healing are two parallel systems within Islam. But as in the Christian theological tradition there is also a more philosophical and ethical discussion about of God as the ultimate cause of illness and the duty of human beings to seek treatment and healing and to reduce human suffering. Medical science is often justified by a sentence ascribed to Muhammad saying that God does not create any illness without at the same time creating the healing remedy against this illness.

The chapter discusses three main types of bioethical issues. First, issues at the beginning of life, like assisted reproduction, abortion and stem cell research, are presented. The restrictive attitude to IVF is a result of the attitudes to marriage and sexuality within Islam, but there is also a discussion about the starting point of human life. Traditionally, three different stages in the development of the fetus (each on 40 days) have been identified, but there are also those who claim that the fetus has a moral status already from conception. There are also different opinions about abortion, from a restrictive view only allowing abortion when the life of the mother is endangered to a more liberal view, using the health and wellbeing of the mother, or even social and economic conditions as arguments. Today, there is a tendency to be more open towards abortion after rape.

The second group of issues discussed is related to changes in God’s creation. Reproductive cloning is generally rejected, while somatic genetic therapy is accepted. Even xenotransplantation from genetically modified pigs could be accepted, although this is contested by some Islamic teachers. In issues about the end of life there is a restrictive tendency within Islam in the issue of euthanasia, while there is a broader accept for organ transplantation from dead to living persons.

Svensson’s chapter is a broad and valuable presentation both of the general background for Islamic bioethics, the historical development, and the discussions about
modern bioethical issues. An important conclusion from his presentation is that there could be significant disagreement on ethical conclusion in spite of a general agreement on the sources and methods of interpretation. Also in Islam, religious arguments can lead to quite different conclusions in many issues.

The chapter about bioethics in Judaism (42 pages), written by Lynn Claire Feinberg, the first female rabbi in Norway, is less analytic, but follows the same pattern as the two previous chapters, starting with more general discussions about Judaism and main principles in Jewish ethics. Respect for the human body, human dignity, the duty to save life, and the close relationship between soul and body are some of the important principles.

The Jewish tradition has been closely related to the medical profession, and especially in Talmud we find a very detailed knowledge about illness and human anatomy. In Medieval times, the famous rabbi and medical doctor Maimonides (1135–1204) played an important part, also by warning against an uncritical attitude to the medical treatment described in Talmud.

In Judaism, issues related to reproduction are very important, due to the importance of child bearing. Artificial insemination by sperm from the husband (AIH) is generally viewed as unproblematic, while insemination by donorAID is seen as a problem, especially because of the social and hereditary relationship between father and child. IVF is accepted by many rabbis when no other method is successful. Abortion is seen as a possible solution in cases of rape, incest and infidelity, and also when the life of the mother is endangered. Each case should be treated individually. According to Feinberg, there is also an open possibility both with regard to genetic screening/PGD and stem cell research on embryos. Some rabbis argue that in the first days after conception we only have a «preembryo», and that the fetus gets a higher status after 40 days.

Active euthanasia and assisted suicide is generally unacceptable within Judaism. There have been discussions about the criteria of death, but today brain death is generally accepted. This also opens up for organ transplantation from dead persons. Also in the issue of autopsy Judaism has changed its views from rejection to acceptation during the last 60 years.

The two chapters at the end of the book, written by the editor, on bioethics in Hinduism and in Buddhism, are the shortest chapters (32, respective 24 pages), but in many ways they are the most interesting, especially since little has been written on this subject until recently. The first book on bioethics in Hinduism was published as late as 1995, in a North American context. Jacobsen suggests that the interest in bioethics and Hinduism is mainly caused by the bioethical discussion in USA. He mentions several reasons why Hinduism has not taken up bioethics as a central theme. The great variety and plurality between different Hindu traditions is an obvious reason. Especially in India the possible benefits from modern technology is underlined, leaving less space for ethical considerations.

Still, there are many implications of modern medicine and biotechnology for Hindus. The abortion of female fetuses in India has led to dramatic decrease in the number of girls being born, and new medical technology, especially prenatal diagnosis has played an important role in this development.
There are many different medical traditions in India, and the medical pluralism has opened up both for alternative medical traditions from the Western world and for modern medical technology. Jacobsen’s chapter presents these different traditions and the bioethical principles in Hinduism, through concepts like dharma and ahimsa.

Generally, Hinduism has a positive attitude to modern reproductive technologies due to the religious duty to give birth to a son. Earlier, this problem was solved by religious rituals, based on the principle of niyoga, allowing a woman to become pregnant with another man than her husband, in case of the husband’s infertility or death. Today, assisted reproduction can solve this problem in a medical way. In the issue of abortion, however, Hinduism is quite restrictive in principles, but in practice, abortion is very common in India, although abortion is now illegal in India when the sex of the fetus is known. Euthanasia is also treated with flexibility, and generally there is a skeptical attitude to life-prolonging treatment.

Also in Buddhism, the transition from traditional medicine to modern technological medicine has created new ethical issues. Most of the literature in this field is written by Western academic researchers, and 1995 is a starting point for the construction of a systematic Buddhist bioethics through Damien Keown’s Buddhism and Bioethics. It is important to notice that Buddhism had rules for the monastic communities, not for society as a whole, Jacobsen claims. In Buddhist monasteries the need for treatment of monks and nuns led to an empirical-rational view of illness and treatment.

The three fundamental ethical principles in Buddhism, Buddha, dharma (the teaching) and sangha (the monastic community) are important to understand the attitude to bioethical issues. The most central issue in Buddhism is the end of life, and Jacobsen presents the discussion about life-prolonging treatment and natural death. Active euthanasia is forbidden, but many Buddhist accept passive euthanasia. Abortion is viewed as problematic, since conception is defined as the starting point of life. Still, there is considerable disagreement between Buddhist, and abortion to protect the life of the mother is generally accepted. Also in other cases, Buddhists hold a quite liberal attitude to abortion, compared to people from other world religions.

This book contributes to a better understanding of the complexity both within and between the different religious traditions in our modern world. There are obvious differences between the three monotheistic religions and the Indian religions, and this is reflected in the book, where the chapter on Christianity is the starting point and the most comprehensive chapter. The book shows that we should not present ‘the religious viewpoint’ as something given. The situation is much more nuanced than we usually think.

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This book deserves a celebration, as for the first time ever, a comprehensive survey on law and religion in the five Nordic countries has been published. Various scholars have met in the Nordic Research Network on Law, Religion and Ethics for nearly a decade, and their ensuing project is by nature an interdisciplinary one. The contributors come from law and human rights studies, ethics, religion, the social sciences and theology. The result is a detailed analysis of the complex field of law and religion in the Nordic countries, including studies of different laws on religion and theology (and philosophy) of law in this region. At a time when our discussions about multiculturalism and democracies are taking place, religion in the public sphere and political ethics are more urgent topics than ever before, and this volume is of great importance in addressing these issues. Indeed, it is seldom that published scholarship turns out to be relevant for the grand political discourses and debates in society to the degree it does in this instance.

This Nordic interdisciplinary network formulated four main research questions at the outset of their work: 1. How does Nordic Law regulate religions? 2. Do Nordic religious norms influence or have an impact on Nordic law, and if so, in what manner? 3. Do the solutions represent a specific Nordic character? 4. Which methodologies are useful when investigating these questions?

Twenty-four scholars have contributed to this book, writing a total of twenty-eight articles. The introductions include an informative presentation of central European perspectives on church versus state discourses (Silvio Ferrari) and an article about American law and religious discourse (John White). The book’s first chapter has been written by Kjell Å. Modéer. This opening section contains the book’s most descriptive articles, containing historical and analytical pieces from authors located in Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Denmark. Next, Tage Kurtén and Pamela Slotte open the more normative second section, which deals with late modern challenges. Additionally, this section contains informative presentations of relevant sentences from Strasbourg and their consequences for law and public policy in the Nordic countries. Ida Auken and Matilda Arvidsson address important philosophical and theological issues in national and international law. Svend Andersen analyzes the phenomenon of law in Nordic Lutheranism and is followed up by Ulrik Becker Nissen, who elaborates on the theme of Lutheran natural law in contemporary Nordic society. Other interesting articles in this section discuss the situation of the Catholic Church (Bernt Oftestad) in the Nordic countries, Jewish perspectives (Hanne Trautner-Kromann) as well as Islam and law (Rubya Mehdi and Jørgen s. Nielsen). The volume concludes with a challenging epilogue, signed by the three editors, Lisbeth Christoffersen analyzes Church Autonomy in Nordic Law.

This book is valuable both as historical documentation concerning the initial development of the traditional Lutheran State Church in the Nordic countries and onwards up to the current secular, late modern situation, and as a deeper reflection on how moral values, religion and theology are still present in law and legal institutions.
in our somewhat secularized Nordic societies. Its first section is of importance for the
ongoing debates about the relationship between church and state and for recent discus-
sions about religion in the public sphere. The second part is an interesting contribution
to legal philosophy in the Nordic countries, where several of the scholars claim that
there is still such a thing as legal theology in our countries. The grand positivists in
Nordic legal studies, Axel Hedenius in Sweden and Alf Ross in Denmark, passed away
decades ago. But do they have successors who may protest against the suggestion that
Christian theology (or even Lutheran theology) still has an impact on secular law in the
Nordic countries? This book uses the metaphor about «life in the ruins», and the three
editors pose an important question in this way: «We may be facing a de-secularization
of the Nordic societies and a common but to some extent eroded or «ruined» Lutheran-
ism reshaped with new normative suggestions and a new religious pluralism, and the
impact religious norms will have on legal solutions, norms or structures in the future is
uncertain.»

I am so impressed after reading this splendid book that I almost feel it is unfair to
point out fields which are not sufficiently elaborated upon when the volume contains
in excess of 600 pages (my suggestions may therefore be appropriate for a second
volume). For example, the title «Law and Religion» is so broad that I would imagine
that a few of the authors would have included criminal law in their analyses. While this
field is mentioned, it has been awarded very little space in this book, and deserves
more. The history of the relationship between church and state in developing punish-
ments and penal codes also makes for interesting reading in the Nordic countries. Mor-
ever, it is an important topic in contemporary debates about the old phenomena that
legal theology and philosophy traditionally have in common: guilt, responsibility,
punishment, forgiveness and atonement. I therefore ask the authors to continue
working in their research network in order that they will be able to offer us some new
reflections on these old theological and juridical themes.

I read this book in Norway during the weeks after July 22nd, 2011, the day on which
terrorist bombings were undertaken on the government buildings in Oslo, and the mas-
sacre took place on the island of Utøya. I was still reading it when our media were full
of debates about multiculturalism, freedom of speech, ‘Islamophobia’, democratic
values, police and legal institutions’ duties, our criminal law, punishment and prison
system. I was reading it when we could see that the country’s churches were more
visible in the public sphere than ever before. The Oslo Cathedral became the center for
a mourning nation, and all over the country, people gathered together in their churches.
I saw pictures from a funeral where a Lutheran minister and an Imam conducted the
ritual together. This book was highly relevant in this distressing and unprecedented
situation, which is the greatest compliment I can give it.

In the book’s concluding section, the three editors raise the question whether a spe-
cific «Nordicness» is to be found in the discourse on law and religion. As stated above,
I read this book in my home country of Norway during the summer of 2011, before and
after the terrible massacre on Utøya and terrorist attack on the Norwegian government
buildings in the center of Oslo. The editors sound nearly prophetic to my ears when
they write: «It has been Nordic political strategy to diminish fear with the help of open
ness, transparency and public debate.» Yes, it has been an important part of the Nordic model up to July 22nd, 2011, and the atmosphere in Norway during the initial weeks after the tragedy give us qualified reasons to believe that it will remain so. The metaphor used throughout the book is almost too appropriate in this situation: It is ‘rising from the ashes’ once again!

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This anthology offers the reader a valuable insight into contemporary religious trends in Norway from multiple perspectives. The data is primarily gathered from an extended ISSP-survey from 2008, Religion 2008, but is also being complemented by earlier surveys. Due to this empirical basis it is foremost the dominating institutionalized religion that is discussed.

The explicit aim of this book is to investigate and discuss to what extent the claim «the return of religion» is applicable to contemporary Norway. All twelve chapters, with altogether eight authors, attempt, from their point of view and from different angles, to give an answer to this question. Due to limited space, not all chapters will be described and discussed with the same accuracy. The focus will therefore be on chapters that I consider having a more general value, not the least in regard to the secularization thesis.

In the first chapter «Changes in the religious lives of Norwegians» Pål Ketil Botvar is occupied with the general religious changes during the last 20 years. This is a very interesting chapter where many illuminating figures and tables are being presented, offering an impression of that the secularization thesis is still valid. The presented figures show a weakening of religion and simultaneously a strengthening of non-religious views during these years. However, this is not the author’s conclusion. With reference to the rites of passage in which attendance have been rather stable, the author states that these rituals are «a central part of the religious life of the population» (p. 17). To use the high proportion still participating in these rituals as a refutation of the secularization thesis is indeed highly problematic. Thus, earlier investigations have shown that a majority of the population interprets these in rather secular terms (see for example RAMP).

Another chapter of great interest, written by Pål Ketil Botvar and Jan-Olav Henrikksen, has the title «Towards an alternatively religious revolution?». The authors formulate an essential question regarding the religious field of today, where a growth in spirituality outside the traditional religions is highly noticeable. The question is: Does the term «alternative religiosity» entail forms of religion of different character? (p. 63). The answer given to this question is: Yes, there are two, «new spirituals» and «alternative believers». One important difference between the two is that the alternative belie-
vers are closer associated to traditional religiosity than the new spirituals while the latter explicitly demarcate themselves from the old kind of religiosity. Another differentiating variable is the socio-economic background. The new spirituals are primarily present among people with many resources while the alternative believers primarily are present among people in a more vulnerable social position. These findings are of great importance and will hopefully lead to a more nuanced discussion in regard to the new spirituality, or as the authors express it, the alternative religiosity.

Jan-Olav Henriksen and Ulla Schmidt discuss in their chapter «The location and importance of religion in the public sphere» how all Norwegians, including the religious ones, during the last 20 years have become more sceptical to religious leaders trying to affect public decisions. On the other side there is a large support for religious leaders taking part in public debates about important societal problems. The authors interpret the first finding as a result of the population’s acceptance of the differentiation of societal systems, in this case the religious and the political. An explanation of the latter is that religious leaders are accepted in public debates concerning questions with moral implications as long as they do not use religious language. The authors claim, that in the public debate the religious leaders cannot, insist on having a special authority due to their religious position. Instead they have to convince the public with arguments and views along the same lines as other participants in the debate. But as the authors underline, this shall not be seen as a secularistic position (p. 91) in spite of the fact that also believers seem to acknowledge that religion today is an entity that must function on secular premises (p.92). Another possible conclusion, in my view, is that contemporary Norway is on its way over the third threshold of secularization as Lambert (1999), in his article «Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age», expresses it.

In another chapter by Ulla Schmidt and Jan-Olav Henriksen the relation between religion and ethics is considered. One preliminary conclusion being drawn is that religious individuals do not differ from the population as a whole in relation to moral or ethic questions. In spite of this the authors declare this not to be interpreted as if the relation between religion and moral is weakened as such. It is not a question about compartmentalization. They argue with reference to Kathryn Tanner who declares that religious commitment is consistent with moral pluralism and change. In such a case moral heterogeneity and pluralism cannot automatically be interpreted as a downgrading of religion and its importance to the individual’s moral questions (p. 147). The following chapter by May-Linda Magnusson and Pål Repstad concerning religion and equal rights for men and women has got some points in common with the former chapter. They conclude that religious engagement has got an effect in this context though factors like gender, education and age explains more. Simultaneously a clear tendency is that the difference between the religiously engaged and the others has become smaller and smaller over the years. This trend will probably continue due to societal pressure. In my view this is another indication of a declining importance of religion in regard to other societal contexts, that is compartmentalization.

The explicit aim of this anthology was to investigate to what extent it is possible to argue for the claim of «the return of the sacred» in regard to contemporary Norway. This is an ambitious goal but this book is showing possibilities to accomplish such a
project. The various articles have in regard to different areas presented indication of the return of the sacred as well as its opposite, a continuing secularization. I myself agree with one of the editors, Ulla Schmidt, who in the concluding chapter claims that even if «secularization» cannot be used to give a fully true description of the religious situation in Norway of today; «secularization» is the best term to grasp some of the most obvious and dominating tendencies.

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Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion (eds.) 2010. Religion and Youth. Theology and religion in interdisciplinary series in association with the BSA sociology of religion study group. Farnham, UK: Ashgate. 278 pages.

James A Beckford in his introduction to the volume Religion and Youth point out how questions about the relation between religion and youth remain a central theme in discussions about continuity and change in all religious traditions. The attitudes, values and practices of youth are studied as seismographs of wider social and cultural shifts in society. But studies of youth and religion also reflect shifts in researchers understanding of these transformations, as well as in more normative attitudes about the development of modern societies.

Beckford points to three such shifts in studies of youth and religion in the recent decades: firstly a movement from the turf of religious institutions, expressed in an interest for formal processes of religious socialisation and adherence to religious beliefs and practices among youth, toward a greater focus on youth as autonomous agents in forming religion. Secondly a new interest among social scientists for youth and religion following the challenging of the secularisation thesis and the new visibility of religion as factor a social and political change as well as in media and popular culture. Thirdly a shift from analyzing youth religiosity from a life cycle perspective towards seeing it as a process framed by the experiences of a particular generation, which places more emphasis on the interplay between religious and broader processes of social and cultural change in society.

The contextualization of the book in this shift towards a new interest for a sociology of youth religion is also stated in the aim of the book, expressed by the editor Sylvia Collins-Mayo in her introduction to the volume. The aim is to highlight some of the most important research focusing on youth religion over the last ten years but also introduce significant new issues and introduce a new research agenda for years to come. This broad agenda is reflected in the structure of the book. The 27 chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion by the editors and an epilogue by professor Linda Woodhead, is structured in five thematic parts: «Generations and their legacy», «The big picture: surveys of belief and practice», «Expression», «Identity», «Transmission» and «Researching youth religion». The first part forms a review and critical evaluation
of approaches in previous studies, while part two through five gives examples of recent mainly qualitative empirical work on the religiosity of youth. Most of the chapters are fairly short, 6–8 pages, thus providing a «smorgasbord» of different issues and directions in research on religion and youth but not so much space for in-depth explorations of cases, methods and perspectives. The geographical focus remains predominantly Anglo-Saxon with a focus on Britain, the US and Australia. The range of religious traditions covered is dominated by protestant Christianity but also includes examples of shamanistic practices, teenage witchcraft, Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism.

Despite the shift away from institutionalized religion described by Beckford many of the chapters retain a strong focus on the forms and interests of Christian Churches towards the life of youth, such as youth groups, camps, confirmation classes and the role of clergy. There are some good critical discussions of the reasons and implications of this agenda for research on the relation between youth and religion such as Gordon Lynch’s critical review of «generation X spirituality» and Abby Day’s discussion of the significance of young peoples’ social belonging in everyday contexts and relations for their articulations of faith. There are also good examples of research bringing in perspectives from youth studies, cultural anthropology, and broader sociology for example in Karenza Moore’s study of «crasher clubbers», Elizabeth Cooksey and Tessa Dooms study of the sexual life of teens, and Pia Karlsson Minganti’s study of young Muslim women. However, the major impression after reading the chapters is that the focus on the interests and practices of organized religion is still strong in the field. This is also, perhaps not consciously, reflected in the title of the book. The choice of «Religion and youth» instead of the possible alternative «Youth and religion» signals a perspective from the viewpoint of religious organizations rather than from young people’s situation and experiences. However, as pointed out by Pink Dandelion in his concluding chapter, this tension between «agendas linked to change in what life used to be like» and «questions arising out of the experience of the young people themselves» (p. 243) reflects the challenges of the field at present. Thus, despite a slight feeling of disappointment given the aspirations of outlining a new agenda of research in the introduction I see the volume as a significant contribution to the field. Its broad scope and variety of examples furthermore contributes to firmly place religion on the agenda of broader youth studies. As a researcher in the area of youth and religion I, however, appreciate most the concluding section which opens up some crucial issues for further research, such as the concept of belief, the choice of methods, gender and class as lenses for studying youth religion, and the ethical dilemmas of researchers’ own religious experiences and interests in exploring the religious lifeworlds of young people in contemporary society.

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