

abstract This article discusses the sociological understanding of popular religion by first exploring the theories of Gramsci. It then critiques this approach by arguing that the social construction of popular religion in contrast to institutionalized religion is not as clear cut in our late modern, multi-faith and global world as it was in the early modern period. Through the use of new internet methodologies (e.g. Ngram Viewer), it is argued that if spirituality reflects the democratization process of mysticism, popular religion, on the contrary, represents its gentrification.

keywords hyper-real religions ♦ lived religion ♦ mysticism ♦ popular religions ♦ spirituality

Introduction

In its worst possible interpretation, popular religion can make reference to the ‘vulgar’, the ‘superstitious’, the ‘hopelessly irrational’, the ‘socially retrograde’ and the ‘idiotic’ (Berlinerblau, 2001). Popular religion often reflects the lived and unstructured religion of subordinated groups and is a term which has developed mainly in contrast to institutionalized, established and/or official religion which has a rationalized, codified and written-down theology. It also refers to the religion of the people when they subvert the codified official religion of the elite group by, for example, changing the official liturgy of the established religion to their own liking, bringing eclectic elements into a syncretic set of beliefs from other religions that are not officially recognized, or simply by following a previous religion in opposition to a new official one. In Parker’s (1998: 205) view, ‘[u]nlike the [official] religion of reason characteristic of the intellectual elites and clergy, popular religion is a religion of rites and myths, of dreams and emotions, of body and the quest for this-worldly well-being’.

Importantly from a sociological point of view is that what is meant by popular religion is context-dependent. For example, in a location where there is a sharp contrast between an urban and rural setting, the official religion is often dominant in cities whereas

popular religion (e.g. syncretic aspects of Catholicism with nature religion or animism) tends to be more practised in villages and among illiterate peoples. However, this does not stop urbanites from tapping into popular religion and seeking the help of, for example, a spiritual healer who will perform alternative rituals to the ones performed within institutionalized religion. Another context is that of a colonized country in which the official religion is the one brought by the new dominant ethnic group, and popular religion is the one practised by the dominated ethnic group (see below). Although popular religion comprises a multitude of unorganized elements, often in contradiction, some theorists define popular religion not in terms of a urban/rural divide or a colonial context but specifically with regard to class divide; the upper class belonging to the official religion and the lower to the popular religion. These theorists, following the legacy of Gramsci, sometimes see popular religion as a form of contestation against dominant culture.

This article will first use the theories of Gramsci in a western setting as a point of entry to the debate on how to theorize popular religion. It will then unpack the limitations of this approach and discuss how recent sociocultural changes make it harder to

maintain the boundaries between official and popular religions. The discussion on the gentrification process of popular religion into spirituality and the democratization of mysticism into spirituality at the end of the article will give further evidence of the difficulty of keeping this dichotomy as pristine as it was in the heyday of modernity.

Gramsci and popular religion

Gramsci wrote about this issue in Italy before the Second World War and at a time period in which his country was moving from an agricultural society to an industrial one. According to this Marxist philosopher, the Church is an institution that managed over the years to keep popular religion in check:

The strength of religions, and of the Catholic church in particular, has lain, and still lies, in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower. The Roman church has always been the most vigorous in the struggle to prevent the 'official' formation of two religions, one for the 'intellectuals' and the other for the 'simple souls'. (Gramsci, 1991: 328)

Gramsci sees the subaltern culture as different and in opposition to the Church's official values; however this opposition is not always conscious or explicit (Nesti, 1975). Popular religion comprises a multitude of unorganized elements often in contradiction. Gramsci argues that some of the elements have a potential to lead to novelty and to a contestation against the state. These elements could be framed to build a collective consciousness within the popular mass and lead to an organized opposition against hegemonic power.

Gramsci does not make reference to popular religion as a whole when it comes to reaching this revolutionary strength. As he clearly points out, some elements of this subaltern culture cannot be of help as they are remnants of past historical periods and not in line with, for instance, the development of the Italy of his time as an industrial society. Indeed, he states that there is a need to combat 'the residues of the pre-capitalist world that still exist among the popular masses, especially in the field of religion' (Gramsci, 1991: 392). These popular religious movements, for Gramsci, can be both progressive and regressive, and only their progressive attributes have the potential to be counter-hegemonic. Gramsci is here explaining how some progressive movements within popular religion have already

attempted revolt, but have been at a later stage absorbed by the Church, counteracting their revolutionary power:

Many heretical movements were manifestations of popular forces aiming to reform the Church and bring it closer to the people by exalting them. The reaction of the Church was often very violent: it has created the Society of Jesus; it has clothed itself in the protective armour of the Council of Trent; although it has organized a marvellous mechanism of 'democratic' selection of its intellectuals, they have been selected as single individuals and not as the representative expression of popular groups. (Gramsci, 1991: 397)

Gramsci (1991: 331–2) also makes reference to other examples such as the creation of strong popular mass movements centred on personalities such as St Dominic and St Francis. Instead of allowing such division, the Church again managed to absorb their charisma by creating new religious orders, and thus counteract counter-hegemonic processes. For Gramsci, at the time of his writing, the Society of Jesus was the last of the great religious orders as its origins were reactionary.

It should be noted that this hegemonic power was not always omnipotent. As McGuire (2008: 63) points out, popular religion in the Middle Ages was also a medium for expressing a critique (rather than a revolt) towards the powerful. Indeed, some rituals were aimed at mocking or subverting the powerful. In these, and for a moment only, the official order could then be altered and wealth redistributed.

Popular religion: from Gramsci to colonialism and globalization

The power relationship between the official and popular religion can also be due to ethnic factors. In a setting different from the Italy of Gramsci, and in some multi-ethnic countries, the religion of the dominant ethnic group can be seen/imposed as the official one and that of the dominated ethnic group is relegated to the realm of irrelevance to mainstream public interest as popular religion. In many 'colonized' countries, the official religion became that of the 'white' settler/invasor removing earlier religion(s) such as those of the aborigines to the backstage of its society. These popular religions tend to be indigenous and are typical of Afro-American and Oceanic 'tribal' cultures when they met with Christianity. As Parker (1996: 6) puts it, 'sociologically, when a conquest occurs, the gods of the conquered survive but are regarded as idols or magic for the conquerors'.

This form of popular religion thus becomes a sort of depositary of myths and rituals from indigenous cultures and provides a space where indigenous people can cope with the deculturation process inherent within the Christian and colonialist process.

For example, in Latin America, Blancarte (2000: 600) makes reference to this process as such:

The Indians, like the Africans, used every means available, including religious, to survive under the colonial regimen as well as in the modern-liberal one. The Indian and popular masses do not generate a diverse religious practice, completely autonomous from ecclesiastical institutions; instead, they participate in a complex relationship within a dominant system of beliefs. Popular religion has been in this way a resistance mechanism for some, and for others, a mechanism of integration to a dominant culture and religion.

This difference between ethnic groups does not eventuate only when a more powerful religion lands in a country, it also happens when a non-dominant migrant group moves to another country and brings with it its own religion. An example, and here I am inspired by Houk (1996), is that of the Orisha religion which was established in Trinidad around 1840 when the Yoruba's (as well as that of the Kongolese, the Ewe and the Ashanti) culture was transplanted from Africa. During the second half of the 19th century, Orisha worshipers began syncretizing their own deities from their home land with Catholic saints. Some commentators view this as a camouflage under their imported religion of that of the dominant one (e.g. hiding the representation of Ogun, a sword-brandishing warrior, under the disguise of St Michael), others claim that these African migrants willingly syncretized the two belief systems to enrich their own one. Around 1915, when the 'protestantized' Spiritual Baptist religion became more mainstream, and around 1950 when East Indians brought Hinduism with them, the Orisha religion opened itself to these new faiths and syncretized its belief system even more. Although there has been a recent push towards the Africanization of the Orisha religion and its institutionalization by some sub-groups, this popular religion, like other African migrant religious groups to the new world, is characterized by decentralization, oral liturgies and syncretism. Another example is that of Candomblé which went also through a syncretization process of African religious traditions with Christianity when slaves were brought to Brazil (Cohen, 2007). It is worth pointing out that this type of syncretism can also happen in Africa (Groop, 2010). In northern Namibia, for example, Lutheran Christianity was brought by Finnish missionaries in the 19th century

and the Owambo have as well been observed to display certain forms of hybridity between the two religions that have not been institutionalized or officialized.

Another process might be at hand in some settings. When migrants arrive in a new country, they might be more inclined to adapt their institutional religion from their home country to a more popular format in the host one. For example, Sinha (2013) studies folk Hinduism in Malaysia and Singapore, and observes that rituals of animal sacrifices, extreme rituals, ecstatic ceremonies and ritualistic healing practices endure among the lay Hindu populations. She discovers that these people are returning to their 'roots' and these are meaningful to them. These rituals are not conducted by any religious specialists and are found to have been reconstructed and recreated to the point that some organizations are trying to install awareness and educate Hindus about their religion. The aim is to counter the threat of folk Hindus to convert to other religions, as the field of popular religion allows for fluidity across religions.

Popular religion: from Gramsci to today

As already discussed, Enzo Pace (1979) notes that, for Italian scholars, popular religion tends to be a class phenomenon. It is followed especially by the subaltern classes, and most predominantly, but not exclusively, by the agricultural classes. Peasantry, Davidson (1991) reminds us, was the majority of the population in Gramsci's time. We can thus expect Gramsci to have been inspired by the same understanding of popular religion. However, popular religion is not always the religion of the underprivileged.

Making such a distinction solely between the learned and the illiterate is not always fruitful. Over the last centuries many of the elite have wanted to gain knowledge from 'popular religion', have studied it and have codified some aspects of it. One might remember that during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, popular magic moved from the inarticulate classes to the intellectual ones. For example, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Paracelsus and John Dee were learned men who delved into popular religion and its magic to codify and rationalize it. This magic, also called esotericism, changed through the modern and late modern periods to influence New Age spiritualities. Through the ages, this 'magic' has been commodified and gentrified (Possamai, 2005).

Another case in point is the birth of neo-paganism in the late 1940s, during which period Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) published an ethnography of

contemporary witches. For Gardner, witches had ancient knowledge and powers handed down through generations and he claimed to have been initiated into their nature religion. The alleged ancient nature religion (previously seen as a folk and popular religion) that Gardner codified in his writing led to the birth of the current neo-pagan movement. By this example, it could be argued that contemporary neo-paganism is a reinterpretation of the popular religion of certain folk people. Today, many neo-pagans live in cities, are literate and tend to be from middle-class backgrounds.

Popular religion in the western world, it can be argued, has been gentrified. It is no longer the prerogative of the peasants and/or lower classes, but it is now accessible, if not carried, by the middle classes as well.

One way to move beyond the restriction of this class, urban/rural and ethnic analysis to define popular religion is to use a social constructionist approach (see Beckford, 2003) – basically arguing that understandings of popular religion are in tension with official religion (Berlinerblau, 2001; Possamai, 2008). Popular religion exists because official religion desires to distance itself from more populist types of magical practices. However, popular religion has become so complex in recent years in the western world that the dichotomy between these two religious sub-fields is not as clear-cut as it used to be. Over the years, we have seen more elitist forms of religiosity (e.g. Troeltsch's [1950] mysticism, and Colin Campbell's [1978] secret religion of the educated class) merging with forms of popular religion, and vice versa (see below). Enzo Pace (1987), by using Niklas Luhmann's theory on Complex Society, indeed confirms that mysticism (in Troeltsch's sense) is becoming a form of religious neo-populism. As popular religion becomes a more complex synthesis, it might be better to understand it as a religion that takes 'account of subjective needs, of emotional communication, of face to face rapport, as opposed to all the cold forms of functioning of the traditional religious institution' (Pace, 1987: 12–13).

Official religion reaching for the popular

The time that a church used to be the centre of a community and be centripetal to the local flock is a time gone. Some churches are reaching out to the population by tapping into their own local culture. They are aiming at loosening their ties to the official elitist tradition (e.g. to pews, to prayers books and to Jacobean language – i.e. the language used in the

King James' version of the Bible). To deal with this new and highly mobile society, to adapt to the new spirit of the times, these churches are attempting to move people by narratives rather than apologetic arguments.

During modernity, and in the western world, theology had to follow the direction imposed by the Age of Reason, and mystical expressions of religion were not received positively (Bouma, 2006). However, we are witnessing today a reversing trend in this part of the world. The Catholic Church, for example, after having attempted to denigrate aspects of popular religion within its faith (e.g. eradication of some of its processions, blessings and exorcist activities), is now re-evaluating its cult of saint and of the Virgin and is supporting it more strongly than during modernity, as seen in the interest that the late Pope John Paul II had in pilgrimages. The Vatican has also renewed an interest in exorcism and is catering for the formation of new theologically trained experts (Baglio, 2009). Voyé (1998) writes about this change within Catholicism and underlines the helpful notion of the re-legitimation of popular religion since the advent of late modernity.

Other Christian groups are part of this re-legitimation process as well and some of them show great interest in mega-churches, also called full-service churches, seven-day-a-week churches, pastoral churches, apostolic churches, 'new tribe' churches, new paradigm churches, seeker-sensitive churches, or shopping-mall churches. Under one roof, these churches offer pop-culture packaged worship styles to boutique ministries. The latest generation has huge auditoriums and balconied atriums, orchestras and bands playing soft rock, some of them with even food courts, fountains and plenty of parking.

However, within this movement of the church attempting to become more popular, some insiders, although agreeing on the necessary changes to adapt themselves to late modern culture, see these mega-churches as offering uninventive pre-packaged worship and theology (Drane, 2006). As a reaction to this, emerging churches have recently started to develop. They try to create the ambiance of the art gallery or the café rather than that of an arena or rock concert found in mega-churches. For example, the café churches are organized to have people sitting at tables and chairs, drinking and/or eating and chatting. Other examples are church in the pub, cyber church, 15-minute long commuter church designed for workers on their way to work, and skate church with ramps inside the church hall where skating is mixed with Bible reading. By using a style of socialization more appropriate to our consumer society than having people preached at from a pulpit, it is hoped

to increase church attendance and to have the gospel reach a larger audience. This is reflected in the research that McGuire (2008) conducted among evangelicals who enhanced their religious experiences through popular religious resources provided by the worship services. These were seen as encouraging emotional and intense responses from the worshippers.

The Church did not wait for the advent of late modern culture to attempt to become more popular. There are well-known cases in history (e.g. Vatican II) that prove the contrary. However, what makes this process different nowadays is that official religion aims to adapt to not only people's local culture but to their lifestyle as well. Indeed, the point is not to change the religion to adapt itself to a whole population, but to tailor one of their 'religious products' to a particular niche (e.g. skate church to a particular sub-culture); a process which is called *lifestyling*.

In many parts of the world religion has re-entered the public sphere to such an extent that it has undermined the 'hard line' secularization thesis – i.e. the assumption that religion would disappear in modernized societies. Since this 'hard line' view is not materializing, views on secularization have had to be revised. Some (e.g. Bruce, 2006; Norris and Inglehart, 2004) explain that secularization is still happening but in a much less extreme process than first predicted; others (e.g. Casanova, 2006; Davie, 2006; Martin, 2005) propose that there is a reverse process and that secularization is losing momentum.

But one should not forget that religion has definitely lost its monopoly of culture and that it is no longer an encompassing social force that links all social fields of a society. Bourdieu (1987) makes reference to the term 'dissolution' to reflect that religion is now a sub-field in which clerics are no longer the exclusive religious specialists. As quoted and translated by Rey (2007: 65) in Bourdieu (1987: 119):

Today we are moving in imperceptible stages from ancient clerics ... to members of sects, to psychoanalysts, to psychologists, to doctors, to sexologists, to expression corporelle teachers, to Eastern martial arts, to life counsellors, to social workers. They all take part in a new field of struggle over the symbolic manipulation of the conduct of private life and the orientation of one's vision of the world, and they all develop in their practice competing and antagonistic definitions of health, of healing, of the treatment of bodies and of souls.

But what of popular religion? Steve Bruce (2011), who is a strong advocate of the secularization thesis, argues that popular religion is doubly vulnerable to this process. As it lives within the Church, the

decline of the Church can only lead to a reduction in the vitality of popular religion. His argument is that popular religion must be sustained by an institutional core. While I agree with this statement, this refers to popular religion within a church (see difference between spirituality and unchurched spirituality below). I would nevertheless like to point out that popular religion can also exist and develop outside institutionalized walls and can thus develop. These forms of popular religion, as the next section explores, cannot claim to reclaim the political and social strength of the Church of yesteryear, but nevertheless, they offer a type of revitalization of the religious in people's everyday lives.

New forms of popular religion in everyday life?

Popular religions do not have to be based within an established church, they can be lived outside them, while others can nevertheless remain in these structures, often at the margins. Because of this impasse with regard to defining and pinpointing exactly what popular religion is, as explained above, some theorists moved away from this notion and started discussing, for example, the term 'lived religion' instead (see below). This coincides with a shift of paradigm among social scientists who became more concerned about the study of the religious experience and beliefs at the grassroots rather than conduct research on dogmas and institutions (Prudhomme, 2010). This is expressed empirically in the research of, for example, Parker (2002). In various surveys in Latin America, Parker (2002) included in the list of answers to choose from the categories 'Catholic in my own way' and '[Catholic] believer outside of the church' alongside the more classic category: 'Catholic'. He discovered that out of all Catholics, a sixth to a third would rather affiliate themselves with these heterodox categories. Those people still call themselves Catholics but want to distance themselves from the dogmas and discipline imposed by the ecclesiastic institution. This links with McGuire's concept of lived religion which points out that everyday life practices of religion do not follow the path as lined up by religious institutions.

McGuire (2008) refers to lived religions to describe a type of revival of popular religions; these are religions on the rise. The increase of consumerism and of means of communication, and the advent of globalization, have created an open space for religions to be individualized and created in a type of free religious market in which people can pick and choose whatever they enjoy. McGuire

(2008) moved away from studying religion at the institutional level and concentrated her research at the individual level. She was concerned with an amalgam of beliefs that are often ever-changing, multifaceted and can be contradictory; that is an aspect of religion that religious institutions do not often consider of importance. Lived religion reflects not only the fact that religions and the messages from official spokespersons change but also more importantly what ordinary people understand those changes to be. She even wonders about the validity of the distinction between popular religion and institutional or official religion as the matter seems to be mainly intellectually framed and only intellectuals appear to care about coherence in religious ways of thinking.

However, this desire for this coherence in ways of thinking is not the exclusive preserve of sociologists, it is also reflected in the work of some religious institutions which, even if they want to reach out to the popular, also want their theology to be pristine from other spiritual importation. For example, in 2003, the Vatican issued a provisional report on the New Age, titled *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'* (The Vatican, 2003), which for the sake of this article, and as will be explored below, New Age, or Alternative Spiritualities, is seen here as a result of a gentrification process of popular religion. The first aim of the Vatican is to inform those engaged in pastoral work on how the New Age movement differs from the Christian faith. Its second aim is to declare that the attractiveness of the New Age movement for some Christians may be due to a lack of knowledge of their own Christian faith, which, it is highlighted, provides the same answers as the New Age to current social and spiritual ills. The report indicates that ideas from the New Age movement have infiltrated Christian faith and practice. For example, the document states that there have been too many cases where Catholic centres of spirituality were actively diffusing New Age ideas in the Church instead of 'true' Catholic spirituality and that even in a cultural environment marked by religious relativism, New Age religiosity cannot be given the same status as the Christian faith. The late Pope John Paul II even warned about the 'return of ancient Gnostic ideas under the guise of the so-called New Age'.

Part of this query about the infiltration of New Age practices into Catholicism is the fact that globalization has affected popular religions. Obadia (2010) argues that this process has allowed these forms of religiosity to be less tied up with official religions and not only can they now more adequately resist institutionalized religion, but, contrary to how

the Vatican sees it, they can also revitalize it. These global processes allow these flows of religious ideas and beliefs to be removed from their institution of origin. Another such case is hyper-real religions. These refer to a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life (Possamai, 2012). Baudrillard's (1988) theory of commodity culture, which is the source behind the coining of the term hyper-real religion, removes any distinction between objects and representation. In their place, he pictures a social world constructed out of models or 'simulacra' which have no foundation in any reality except their own. In these religions, these 'simulacra' are constructed as a mix of religions, philosophies and commodified popular culture. For Baudrillard, society is now structured by signs and symbols in which it becomes difficult to distinguish the real from the unreal: from this, hyper-reality – that is a situation in which reality has collapsed – takes over. This vision portrays contemporary western society in which people seem to seek spectacle more than meaning. In this hyper-real world, globalized and commodified popular culture offer a library of narratives to be borrowed and used by anyone ready to consume them for their religious bricolage. A commonly known 21st-century example is Jediism (from the *Star Wars* films): a group mainly active on the Internet that has created a popular religion out of the inspiration from the *Star Wars* narratives, especially its Jedi Knights' spirituality, and the syncretic assemblage between various religions and philosophies. However, this phenomenon is not limited to full-blown cases such as Jediism and can also involve people being religiously inspired by popular culture, by, for example, watching the *The Da Vinci Code* or *Avatars*, playing a game such as *World of Warcraft*, or being influenced by conspiracy theories (Fătu-Tutoveanu and Pintilescu, 2012; Possamai, 2012).

Although hyper-real religions have existed since at least the 1960s, the Internet has been instrumental in the growth of this phenomenon. The Internet is now more than just a tool for work or research for academics and the military. As regards religion, the Internet is no longer simply a cyber-billboard where people post messages; through Web 2.0 the Internet is now a powerful social technology allowing people to interact at broadband speeds about issues ranging from personal to political and religious. A broad range of groups adopted this new technology and some of them established this symbiosis between religion and popular culture which is observable in cyberspace. Rather than standing up on a soap box and speaking about the faith derived from *Star Wars*,

or spending hours photocopying a Jediist manifesto and mailing it to a list of people (and paying for stamps), one can simply create a website that anyone in the world can access. Further, 'preachers' do not have to reveal their identity. They can hide their identity behind a screen and even use pseudonyms and are thus protected from the threat of stigmatization in the offline world. This is likely to impact on the growth and importance of popular religion in the near future.

Popular religion, spirituality and mysticism

What is meant by being religious today is no longer what it once was. Religion is metamorphosing into new, renewed and different forms at various levels (Lyon, 2000). Further, with globalization and migration movements, we are living in a culture of pluralism which redefines the role of religion (Giordan and Pace, 2012). This proves to be a challenge for religious institutions which used to have the monopoly of faith in mono-cultural societies. As a result of the collapse of collective systems of codes and being, the result is an increase of freedom in which individuals makes their own sense of their lives and of the rapid changes and the increase of pluralism specific to our current society. More people claim to have no religious affiliations but they are not necessarily atheist; they believe without belonging and might see themselves as more spiritual (and across various religions) than religious. In everyday life/language, religion appears to be connected with institutionalized/organized forms whereas spirituality is viewed more as a self-authored search by individuals who are looking inward. With secularization, the cultural presence of traditional religious institutions has diminished, but the search for a more personal connection to a religion, that is, for spirituality, has increased. In various surveys (Hugues et al., 2004; Marler and Hadaway, 2002), we see that the younger the generation the more spiritual (only) rather than religious it is.

Although the word 'spirituality' was first used in the 17th century as a pejorative term to refer to elite forms of individual religious practice (Cunningham and Egan, 1996: 5), today the word has a different meaning. Not too long ago, sociologists even used to suggested that 'spirituality' would replace 'religion', as the term seems more adequate to the current religious quest in consumer culture (e.g. Roof, 1999). However, research (e.g. Hugues et al., 2004; Marler and Hadaway, 2002) indicates that spirituality is not simply replacing religion. Most people see themselves as 'religious' and 'spiritual' at the same time.

For example, Wuthnow (2001: 307) claims that 'many people who practice spirituality in their own ways still go to church or synagogue'. From a Christian perspective, Cunningham and Egan (1996) make reference to spirituality as the lived encounter with Jesus Christ in the Spirit. For them, spirituality cannot be limited to an exclusively individualistic 'care of the soul' and involves being part of the local and worldwide community. Going to 'church' on Sunday allows this connection, and furthermore, by listening to the word of God, Christians can enter 'into the story that tells us about Jesus the Christ in the Spirit [i.e. being spiritual] and to respond to that story both as individuals and as part of the local and worldwide community' (Cunningham and Egan, 1996: 33). Indeed, social scientists find from various surveys that the large majority of the people surveyed claim to be religious and spiritual at the same time, whereas those who claim to be spiritual but not religious appear to be only a small contingent of people, and spirituality does not seem to replace religion at all. These spiritual (only) actors are not churchgoers and are more likely to experiment with alternative spiritualities and/or Eastern practices.

To make sense of this, it is worth coming back to the classics to put some light on this contemporary phenomenon. Troeltsch's work on mysticism has some strange resemblances with the contemporary spiritual trend.

Bruce Campbell (1978: 231) quotes Troeltsch's definition of mysticism as:

... the insistence upon a direct inward and present religious experience. ... An individualized reaction against highly institutionalized religion, it arises when 'the world of ideas' which makes up the religious belief system has 'hardened' into formal worship and doctrine. Under these circumstances, religion becomes for some people 'transformed into a purely personal and inward experience'.

The author gives a summary of the characteristics of Troeltsch's mysticism as 'an emphasis on direct, inner personal experience; loose and provisional forms; voluntary adherence, usually not formal; a spiritual conception of fellowship; inclusiveness in attitude; indifference toward the demands of society' (B Campbell, 1978: 231). Troeltsch claimed that mysticism was at the beginning of the 20th century the secret religion of the educated class, and predicted that gradually, in the world of 'mass' educated people, this type of religiosity would be predominant. Colin Campbell (1978) saw this in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the development of new religious movements as prescient. It is even more

Google books Ngram Viewer

Graph these case sensitive comma-separated phrases: spirituality, mysticism, popular religion

between 1800 and 2000 from the corpus English with smoothing of 3

Search lots of books

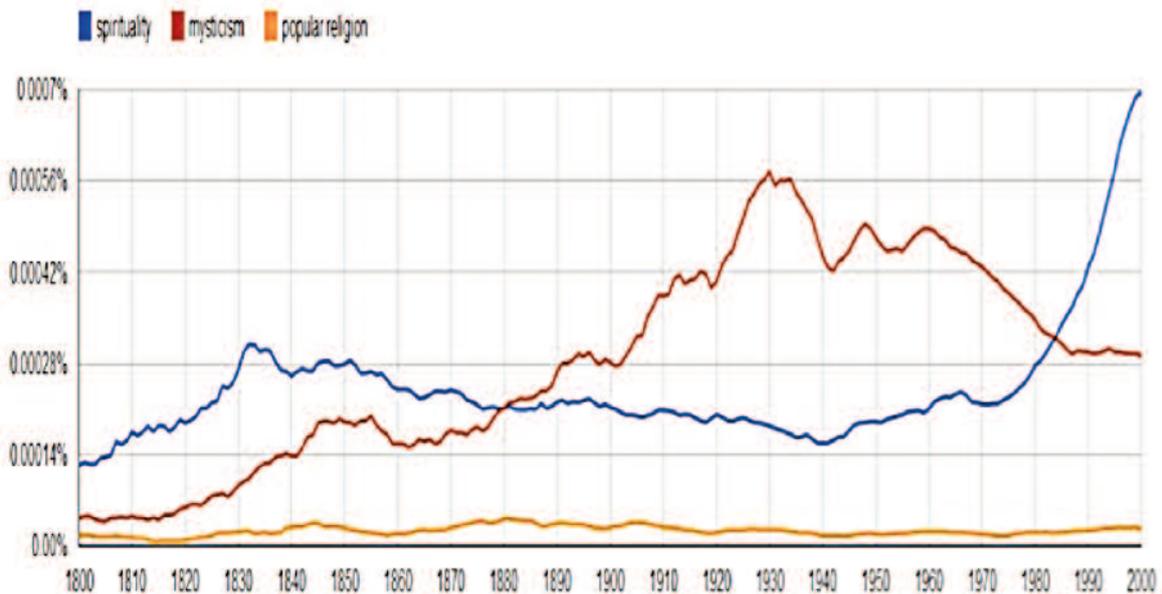


Figure 1. Ngram Viewer of the words 'spirituality', 'mysticism' and 'popular religion'

presient today, at the beginning of the 21st century, in which spirituality has become so important and so mainstream. In this sense, it can be argued that spirituality (a form of religiosity used by all classes) is the democratization of mysticism (a form of religiosity used by the elites).

But what about the relationship between spirituality and popular religion? As seen above, popular religion has been gentrified and has been used by various social classes as well. Further, in our consumer and media world, Knoblauch (2008) makes reference to the collapse of boundaries between institutionalized religion and popular culture which makes of spirituality a popular religion. Hamberg (2009) notices as well some similarities between these two concepts even if the field of research has recently been dominated by discussions of spirituality rather than popular religion.

To help move the debate forward, this article now turns to new data resources provided by Google and

more specifically Google's Ngram, which intends to digitize every book ever printed. According to Alwin (2013), this site had at the time of his comment more than 15 million scanned books which would represent 12% of books ever published. There are, of course, certain issues to take into account when using these new Internet social research methods, but I invite the reader to access Groves (2011) and Savage (2013), for example, to explore this issue further.

Using the Ngram Viewer on Google books, which reports the proportion of references to a given word or combination of words (Savage, 2013) and typing the keywords 'spirituality' (top line on the left), 'mysticism' (middle line on the left) and 'popular religion' (bottom line), one can notice in Figure 1 that from all the books held in Google Books the words 'spirituality' and 'mysticism' are far more popular than that of 'popular religion'. In this graph, the use of this latter word appears to have been used in a



Figure 2. Ngram Viewer of the word 'popular religion'

constant fashion from 1800 to 2000, and remains at the bottom of the graph. However, if one types 'popular religion' by itself in Ngram, we can notice in Figure 2 various trends with these 'closer lenses'. The highest peak in the use of this term in Google Books is in the 1880s, and two notable high peaks happened around the 1850s and 1910s. It is worth noticing that from the 1980s, the term has shown a slow comeback.

Among all the books contained in Google Books, we can observe that the use of the two other terms has changed over time. Around the 1880s the term 'mysticism' was more used (in a print form at least) and peaked in the 1930s, and remained the most used term among these three until the 1980s with the development of globalization and late modernity. Around that time period, the term 'spirituality' became the buzz word for these non-institutional religions. Further, the use of the word 'spirituality' reached quite a high peak in the 1990s. Much can be said and critiqued about the methodology used, but as an instrument, it shows some interesting trends in need of further research, and they nevertheless appear to give at least credence to the claim above of the popularity of the term 'spirituality' over 'mysticism'.

Exploring the same terms on Google Trends (see

Figure 3), and acknowledging the limitations of this methodology, one can notice that the use of the term 'spirituality' (top line on the graph) from people who have 'Googled' the term since 2004 is, as expected, far more used than that of 'mysticism' (middle line on the graph) or 'popular religion' (bottom line). The peak was in 2004 and it has since decreased, however, this clearly demonstrates the current popularity of the term 'spirituality'.

This is part of the emergence of the post-dogmatic religion as explored recently by Riis (2012). As new generations of believers have been taught to question religious authorities, more and more people attempt to establish their own beliefs rather than affiliate themselves with an established dogma. This has led to a growth of subjectivized forms of religion in the non-institutional field (Davidsen, 2012). If this post-dogmatic and non-institutional trend was reflected in the past among the elite through mysticism and among the working and dominated classes through popular religion, this late modern world has eradicated these class differences with regard to this approach to institutionalized religion.

However, one should be aware of differences within mysticism and spirituality. Bruce Campbell (1978: 231) found that Troeltsch writes about two ideal-types of mysticism; these are mysticism and

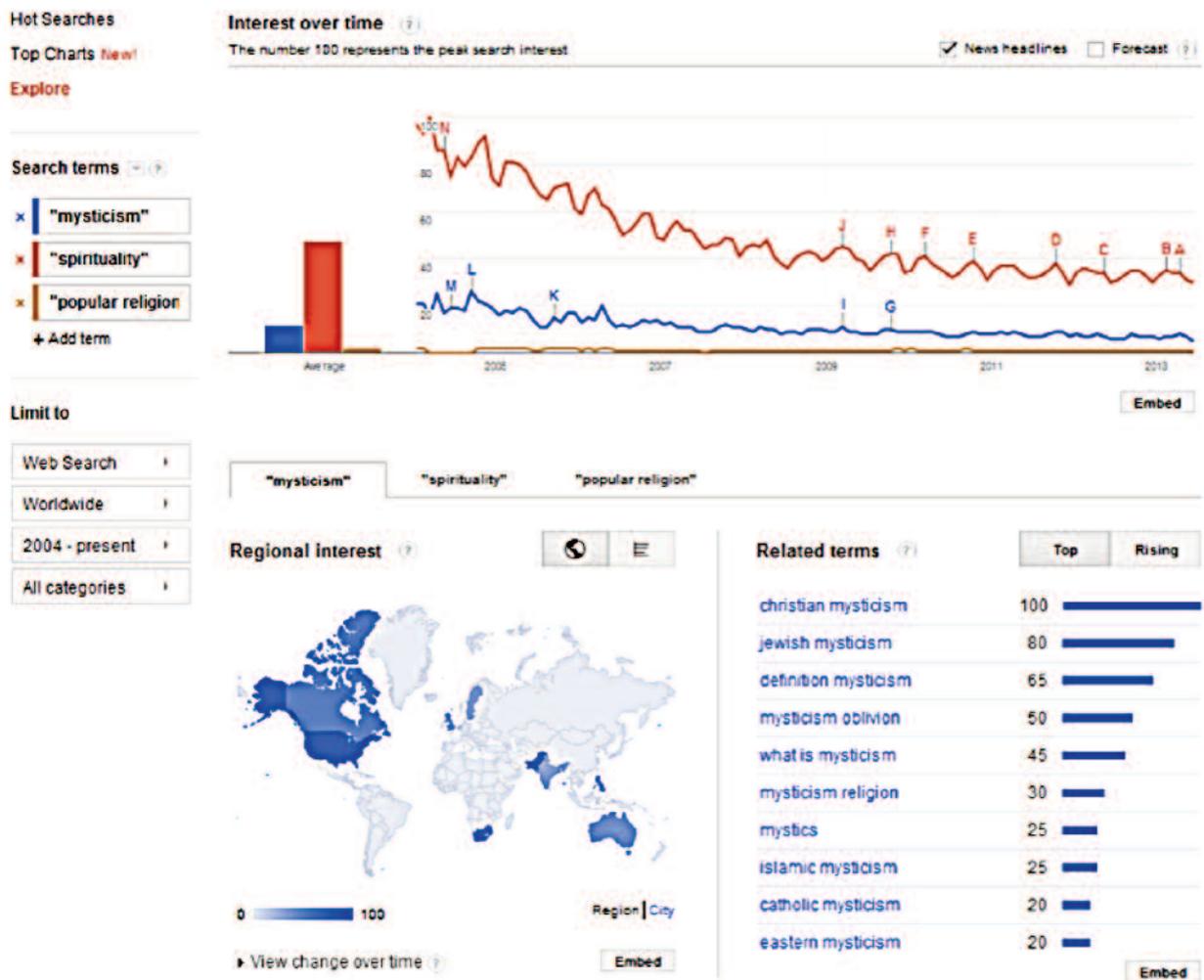


Figure 3. Google Trends for the words 'mysticism', 'spirituality' and 'popular religion'

technical mysticism. Mysticism occurs in established religious traditions but its experience occurs outside the regular forms of worship and devotion to these religions. The experience of the mystics, from this ideal-type, is the means by which they realize and appropriate the tradition of the religious organization in which they belong. They even legitimize and support established ecclesiastical structures. Technical mysticism makes a break with traditional religion. Technical mystics contest the religion within which they have been socialized. They understand themselves to be independent from religious principle and of every religious institution. Technical mysticism sets up its own theory, which takes the place of doctrine and dogma by undercutting the form and structure of the established religions. It discovers everywhere, 'beneath all the concrete forms of

religion, the same religious germ' (Troeltsch, 1950: 231).

The same distinction can be applied to spirituality and like Troeltsch, we could distinguish spirituality from technical spirituality (or what Hamberg [2009] calls unchurched spirituality). While we cannot fully equate spirituality and mysticism to popular religion in late modernity, we can at least claim that technical mysticism and technical/unchurched spirituality are more likely to share similarities with today's popular religion. In this sense, and from a sociological outlook on these lived religions in late modernity, it can be argued that spirituality reflects the gentrification process of popular religion and the democratization of mysticism.

Conclusion

The term 'popular religion' has usually been used as a contrast to institutionalized and official religion. This article has argued that, especially, in a multi-faith, global and late modern setting, as institutionalized religions are reaching to the popular and as popular religions are being gentrified, the dichotomy between these expressions becomes blurred. Even if popular religion can still be described in some contexts in terms of urban/rural, class and ethnic divisions, these demarcations are not as clear-cut as they used to be in an early modern setting. Even if other terms such a lived religion and hyper-real religions have been proposed to cater to some aspects that the concept popular religion does not perfectly address, this article nevertheless claims that it is still an important facet of religion to study, especially with regard to spirituality. Indeed, as this article has argued, and sociologically speaking, spirituality (technical or unchurched more specifically) in late modernity could be understood as an outcome of the gentrification process of popular religion and of the democratization of mysticism.

Annotated further reading

Campion N (2012) *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

A study of popular religion and contemporary alternative spiritualities.

Hume L and McPhillips C (eds) (2006) *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

An edited collection on contemporary spirituality and popular religion in western societies.

McGuire M (2008) *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

A key sociological text in the study of popular and lived religion.

Parker C (1996) *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America*. New York: Orbis Books.

A classic study of popular religion in Latin America.

Vrijhof P and Vaardenburg JJ (1979) *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.

A fundamental contribution to this field of study.

References

Alwin D (2013) Reflection on thirty years of methodology and the next thirty. *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology* 120: 28–37.

Baglio M (2009) *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Baudrillard J (1988) *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beckford J (2003) *Social Theory and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berlinerblau J (2001) Max Weber's useful ambiguities and the problem of defining 'popular religion'. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (3): 605–26.

Blancarte R (2000) Popular religion, Catholicism and socioreligious dissent in Latin America: Facing the modernity paradigm. *International Sociology* 15(4): 591–603.

Bouma G (2006) *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu P (1987) *Choses dites*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Bruce S (2006) Secularization and the impotence of individualized religion. *The Hedgehog Review* 8(1–2): 35–45.

Bruce S (2011) Secularisation, church and popular religion. *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62 (3): 543–61.

Campbell B (1978) A typology of cults. *Sociological Analysis* 39(3): 228–40.

Campbell C (1978) The secret religion of the educated classes. *Sociological Analysis* 39(2): 146–56.

Casanova J (2006) Rethinking secularization: A global comparative perspective. *The Hedgehog Review* 8(1–2): 7–22.

Cohen E (2007) *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cunningham C and Egan K (1996) *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

Davidson M (2012) Future directions in the sociology of non-institutional religion. *Implicit Religion* 15(4): 553–70.

Davidson A (1991) Antonio Gramsci. In: Beilharz P (ed.) *Social Theory: A Guide to Central Thinkers*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin.

Davie G (2006) Is Europe an exceptional case? *The Hedgehog Review* 8(1–2): 23–34.

Drane J (ed.) (2006) The emerging church. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6(1). Special Issue.

Fătu-Tutoveanu A and Pintilescu C (2012) Religious 'avatars' and implicit religion: Recycling myths and religious patterns within contemporary U.S. popular culture. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 11(33): 182–205.

Giordan G and Pace E (eds) (2012) *Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World*. Leiden: Brill.

Gramsci A (1991) *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Groop K (2010) Spirit attacks in northern Namibia: Interpreting a new phenomenon in an African Lutheran context. In: Schmidt B and Huskinson L (eds) *Spirit Possession and Trance: New*

- Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Continuum, pp. 151–70.
- Groves R (2011) Three eras of survey research. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75(5): 861–71.
- Hamberg E (2009) Unchurched spirituality. In: Clark P (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 742–57.
- Houk J (1996) Anthropological theory and the breakdown of eclectic folk religions. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religions* 35(4): 442–7.
- Hugues P, Black A, Bellamy J and Kaldor P (2004) Identity and religion in contemporary Australia. *Australian Religion Studies Review* 17(1): 53–8.
- Knoblauch H (2008) Spirituality and popular religion in Europe. *Social Compass* 55(2): 140–53.
- Lyon D (2000) *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McGuire M (2008) *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marler P and Hadaway C (2002) 'Being religious' or 'being spiritual' in America: A zero-sum proposition? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4(2): 289–300.
- Martin D (2005) *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Nesti A (1975) Gramsci et la religion populaire. *Social Compass* 12(3–4): 343–54.
- Norris P and Inglehart R (2004) *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Obadia L (2010) Globalization and the sociology of religion. In: Turner B (ed.) *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 477–97.
- Pace E (1979) The debate on popular religion in Italy. *Sociological Analysis* 40: 71–5.
- Pace E (1987) New paradigms or popular religion. *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 64(1): 7–14.
- Parker C (1996) *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Parker C (1998) Modern popular religion: A complex object of study for sociology. *International Sociology* 13(2): 195–212.
- Parker C (2002) Les nouvelles formes de religion dans la société globalisée: un défi à l'interprétation sociologique. *Social Compass* 49(2): 167–86.
- Prudhomme C (2010) Quand l'histoire des religions populaires se tourne vers l'anthropologie. In: Aubourg V (ed.) *Religions populaires et nouveaux syncrétismes*. Sainte-Clotilde (La Réunion): Surya éditions.
- Possamai A (2005) *In Search of New Age Spiritualities*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Possamai A (2008) Popular religion. In: Clarke P and Beyer P (eds) *The World's Religions: Continuities and Transformations*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 479–92.
- Possamai A (ed.) (2012) *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*. Leiden: Brill.
- Rey T (2007) *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy*. London: Equinox.
- Riis O (2012) The emergence of post-dogmatic religion. *Implicit Religion* 15(4): 423–38.
- Roof WC (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Savage M (2013) The 'social life of methods': A critical introduction. *Theory, Culture and Society* 30(3): 3–21.
- Sinha V (2013) Mapping a field: Forms of Hindu religiosity in Malaysia and Singapore. *Religion Compass* 7(4): 115–25.
- The Vatican (2003) *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'*. Available at: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/intelrg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20030203_new-age_en.html.
- Troeltsch E (1950) *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (2 vols). London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Voyé L (1998) Effacement ou relégitimation de la religion populaire. *Questions Liturgiques* 79(1–2): 95–109.
- Wuthnow R (2001) Spirituality and spiritual practice. In: Fenn R (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*. Blackwell: Oxford, pp. 306–20.

Adam Possamai is Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the Religion and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. He is the President of the RC22 on the Sociology of Religion of the International Sociological Association. His latest books are *Religious Change and Indigenous Peoples: The Making of Religious Identities* (with H Onnudottir and B Turner, Ashgate, 2013) and *The Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* (as editor, Brill, 2012). [email: A.Possamai@uws.edu.au]

résumé Cet article d'encyclopédie discute de notre connaissance sociologique à propos de la religion populaire en explorant d'abord les théories de Gramsci. Ensuite, il critique cette approche en argumentant que la construction sociale de ce qu'est la religion populaire en contraste avec la religion institutionnalisée n'est plus aussi si claire dans notre monde global aux multiples croyances et à la modernité tardive que lorsque l'on se trouvait au début de la modernité. A travers l'usage de nouvelles méthodologies sur Internet (par exemple Ngram Viewer), cet article propose que si la spiritualité reflète un processus de démocratisation du mysticisme, la religion populaire, au contraire, représente celui d'un embourgeoisement.

mots-clés mysticisme ♦ religions hyper-réelles ♦ religions populaires ♦ religions vécues ♦ spiritualité

resumen Este artículo discute nuestro conocimiento sociológico sobre la religión popular, explorando primero las teorías de Gramsci. Luego, se critica este enfoque, argumentando que la construcción social de la religión popular, en contraste con la religión institucionalizada, no está tan claro en nuestro mundo global con múltiples creencias y la modernidad tardía que cuando se encontraba al inicio de la modernidad. A través del uso de nuevas metodologías en Internet (por ejemplo, Ngram Viewer), este documento propone que si la espiritualidad refleja un proceso de democratización del misticismo, la religión popular, por el contrario, representa el del aburguesamiento.

palabras clave espiritualidad ♦ misticismo ♦ religiones hiper-reales ♦ religiones populares ♦ religión vivida