

*Predicting Religion. Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures,*  
edited by Grace Davie, Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead.  
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Book review by David A. Palmer

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

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The dominant paradigm of the sociology of religions – secularization – is inherently predictive, forecasting the future demise of religion as a structuring social force. With this paradigm increasingly challenged, the editors of this volume asked twenty experts on religion in the contemporary U.K. (and Sweden) to offer predictions for the future of specific religious institutions, traditions, and movements. The book begins with three essays on secularization theory by José Casanova, David Martin and Oliver Tschannen, which, as might be expected, argue for a more refined and prudent use of the concept, without discarding it entirely. The empirical contributions to the book, however, taken as a whole, suggest that, in the British case, future trends will continue to uphold the orthodox theory of secularization: Christian institutions will continue to decline to the point of near extinction; the religious yearning will continue to exist and even flourish, but increasingly in “soft” forms of spirituality with authority centred on individual subjectivity and expressed in vague beliefs and commodified practices which will have no impact on the social structure. Secularization will thus be complete: from being central to the organization of society, to becoming an autonomous institution within a functionally differentiated society, religion will cease to exist as a socially relevant institution, to be replaced by a diffused, pantheistic spirituality providing personal meaning and bodily solace in a rationalized capitalist economy of which it is an integral part. Extrapolating from long-term statistical trends, Steve Bruce (chap. 4) predicts the virtual demise of Christianity in Britain by 2020. Bryan Wilson (chap. 5) continues in the much the same vein, noting that the sizeable material assets of the institutional churches are increasingly becoming a “hollow shell from which the formerly encapsulated life form has largely escaped” (p. 70). The following chapters on religion and social networks show that reconfigurations of the social structure have already killed the social base of Welsh Nonconformism (Chambers, chap. 6), and caused the disappearance of religious socialization among non church-goers (Hirst, chap. 7). If charismatic movements offered the promise of a revival of Christianity, their weak theology and organization have made them unsustainable in the long term (Percy, chap. 8). Government outsourcing of social

programmes to religious groups, the commodification of spiritual services, and the privatization of social life have already seriously diverted energies away from traditional forms of engagement in church life, and threaten the very membership structure of the churches (Cameron, chap. 9). With the self becoming the primary locus of religious authority, as shown in the cases of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians (Yip, chap. 11) and cyberreligion (Pilgrim, chap. 12), the moral and spiritual influence of the churches is further undermined. Quakerism risks fracturing or dissolution as the majority of its adherents refuse any form of religious authority and share no common belief (Pilgrim, chap. 12). Wicca as an initiatory tradition risks being trivialized and diluted by the growing commodification of witchcraft and paganism (Pearson, chap. 14). The New Age movement risks petering out when its largest cohort of practitioners, the Baby boomers, age and eventually die off – a trend which is, however, offset by the increasing diffusion of New Age ideas and practices in mainstream society, and even within its health and educational institutions (Heelas & Steel, chap. 19). This case, together with a study of state-religious collaborations in the Inner Cities (Taylor, chap. 10), are the only two chapters which suggest new forms of religious impact on social structures. But the spiritual beliefs of the non-religious majority, though they certainly exist, are vague and unarticulated -- “there must be *something*” (Hunt, chap. 13); in the case of widespread paranormal beliefs, they “play only a peripheral role in shaping peoples’ self-identity and outlook on life” (Sjödin, chap. 17) and, in the case of astrological belief, it is broadly held but shallow, and “is of little consequence for the functioning of major social institutions in particular and the social system in general” (p. 224). It would appear, then, that Alexis de Tocqueville’s prophecy was true: egalitarian democratic culture leads to a generalized, diffused pantheism which collapses all distinctions between man and God, animals, and the world, leading to a homogenous culture of mediocrity (Green, chap. 15).

The chapters are short, readable, and cover a wide range of communities and scenarios. The book’s main weakness is the parochial White Britishness of its concerns and themes. The absence of studies from other parts of the world (except Sweden) can be understood for reasons of space and coherence – but I am struck by the glaring omission of studies of British immigrant religions such as Hinduism, Afro-Caribbean Christianity and, of course, Islam, reported to be Britain’s fastest-growing religion. To what extent would such studies confirm or modify the picture of inexorable secularization?

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