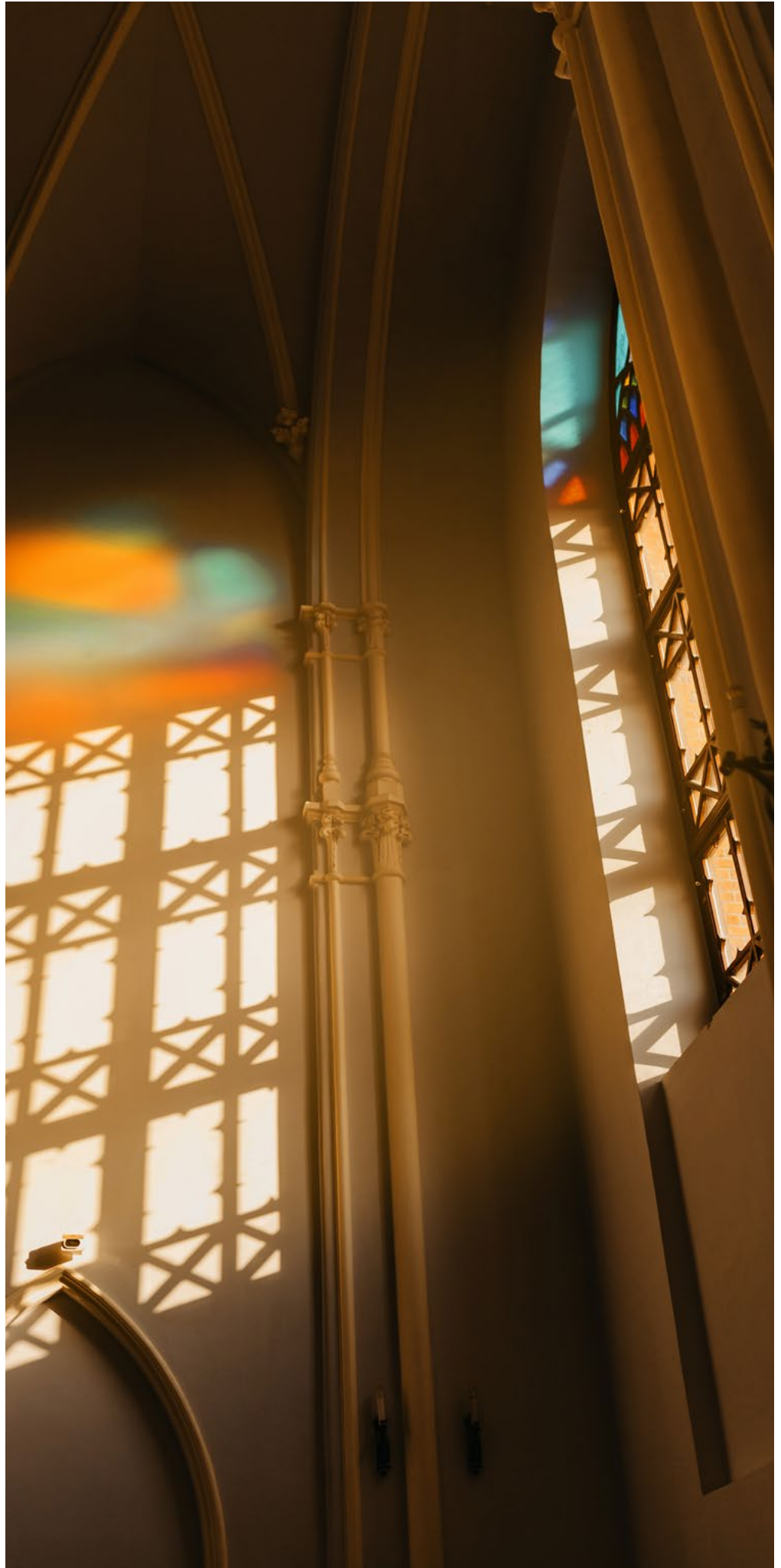


The future of religion

An interview
series
by the
European
Academy on
Religion
and Society





What does the future hold for religion across Europe? The European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) explores this question with five interviewees: Philippe Portier, Mathew Guest, Graham Ward, Bénédicte Lemmelijn, and Linda Woodhead. We dive into developments such as migration, religious orthodoxy, and the role of women in religion, aiming to provide perspectives on religion's future. This publication is a collection of all five interviews and provides an analysis of their joint insights and visions on the future of religion.

All interviews were prepared and conducted by Mohammad Faisal Khalil, Simone Kroes, and Ghila Amati.

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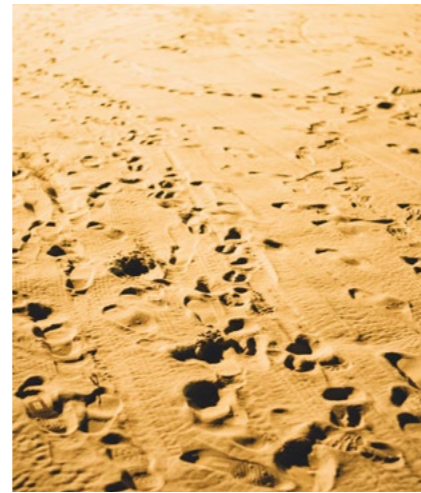
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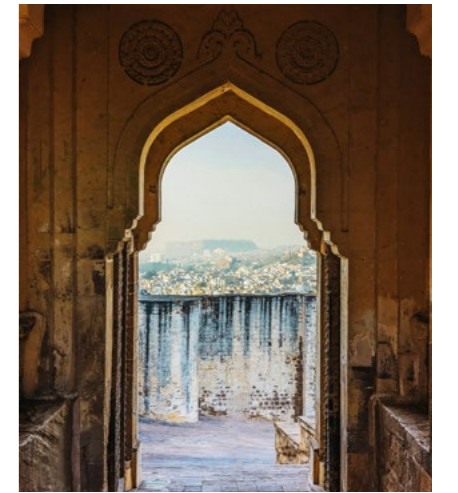
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Religious orthodoxy and the future of religion: A conversation with Philippe Portier

Philippe Portier, a French scholar on Catholicism and secularism, discusses religious orthodoxy and its impact on the future of religion. While distinguishing between institutional and informal orthodoxy, he reflects on the three possible futures: secularisation, post-secularisation, or polarisation. Concerned mostly about polarisation, Portier suggests 'interculturalism' as a way to mitigate the growing divides between secularism and religion.

The contemporary experience of religious orthodoxy and its influence on the future of religion is a topic of vital importance and interest. The European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) explores this topic in an interview with Philippe Portier, a French political scientist and historian renowned for his expertise in Catholicism and secularism. The interview focuses on the social impact of religious orthodoxy and its potential to shape religion's future, highlighting significant trends that might affect religious dynamics, especially in terms of how orthodoxy contributes to social polarisation and exclusion. Portier's research is centred on the interaction between religion and politics, especially the concept and evolution of secularism in society.

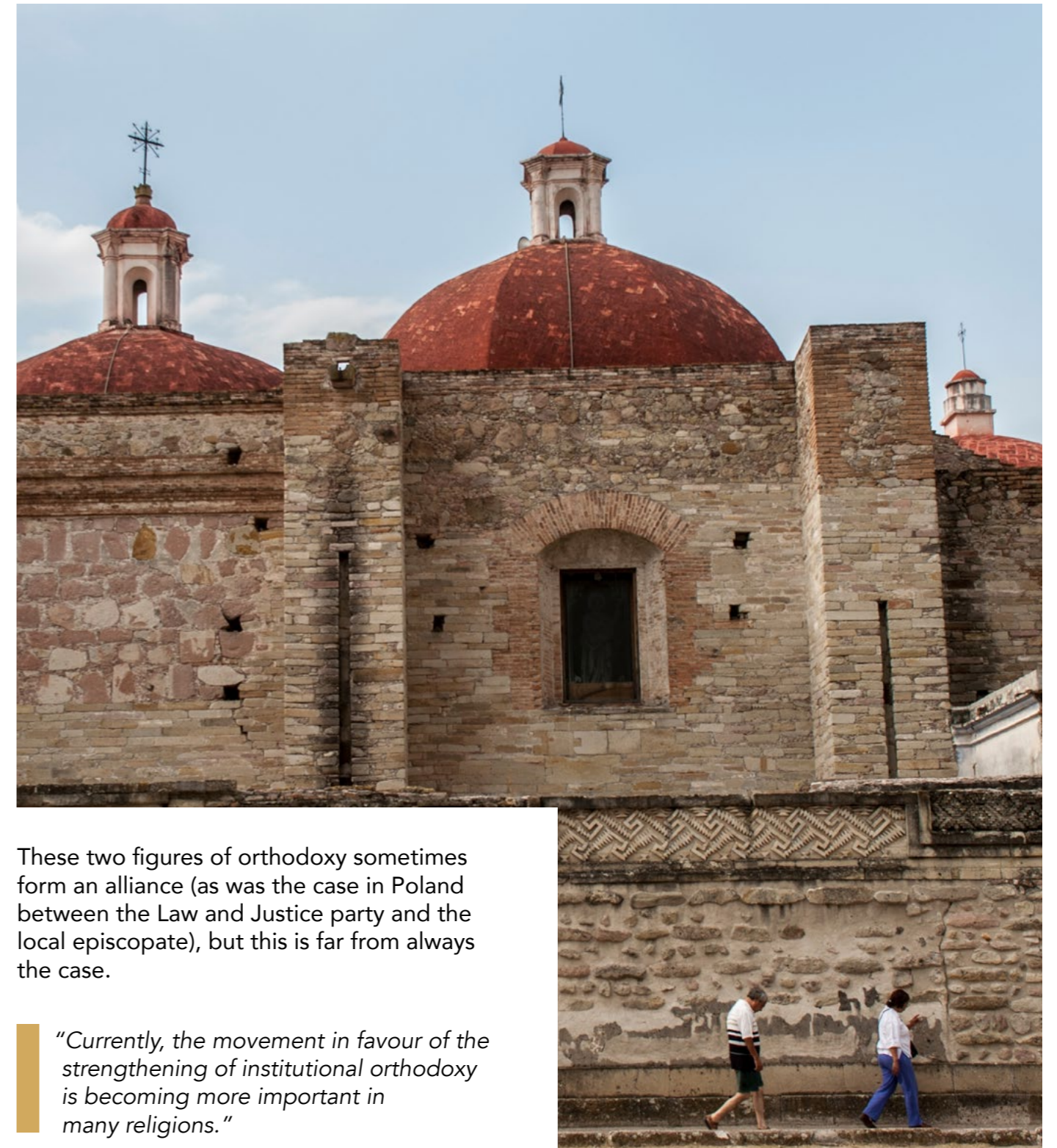
Defining religious orthodoxy

"Religious orthodoxy is a central theme in both my scholarly pursuits and contemporary society," remarks Portier. He defines religious orthodoxy in two primary forms: institutional and informal, each marked differently by three essential features - institutionality, normativity, and radicality. "Institutional orthodoxy," he explains, "aligns closely with religious institutions, adhering to their norms and rules. It embodies institutionality, normativity, and it is generally not radical: while it often rejects the principles of moral liberalism (in terms of managing intimacy), it accepts the formal rules of constitutional democracy. In contrast, informal orthodoxy, less tied to institutionality and normativity, tends towards radicality and can more easily lead to radicalisation." Portier emphasises the growing significance of this 'new' type of orthodoxy, characterised by a

personal sense of belonging and a subjectivity that allows individuals to create their own orthodoxy, often leading to a broader radicalism that challenges not only the liberal policies but also the constitutional foundations of society.

The contemporary impact of religious orthodoxy

Portier's definition of religious orthodoxy is significant in understanding current religious trends. It provides a framework to analyse the increasing polarisation in societies between secular and religious populations and the rise of religious populism. He identifies a growing trend towards institutional orthodoxy within all religious worlds: in Islam, in Protestantism with Evangelicals, in Judaism, and in Catholicism - especially since Pope John Paul II's era. This trend coexists with an escalating radicalisation of secularisation, in that the non-religious population is less and less influenced by Christian culture and more and more inspired by relativistic thinking. That leads to a notable polarisation in European society. Portier explains, "Currently, the movement in favour of the strengthening of institutional orthodoxy is becoming more important in many religions. At the same time, there's the radicalisation of secularism." But it is above all informal orthodoxy that is on the increase, as shown by the rise of Christian populism, and also radical Islam, which are being built outside the traditional structures of belonging. This informal orthodoxy is both the product of secularisation (because of its subjective approach to religion) and its opponent (in that it seeks to recreate an organic social universe).



These two figures of orthodoxy sometimes form an alliance (as was the case in Poland between the Law and Justice party and the local episcopate), but this is far from always the case.

"Currently, the movement in favour of the strengthening of institutional orthodoxy is becoming more important in many religions."



Future trends in religion

Portier's observation about rising radicality has significant implications for the future. Whether found in religious orthodoxy or secularism, it intensifies the divide between two visions of the world, the first supported by a relativist liberalism, the second by an objectivist morality. This results in far-reaching polarisation.

According to Portier, therefore, the future of religion in the next 20 to 30 years is shaped by three main possibilities: "continued secularisation," "post-secularisation," and "polarisation." The first trend, continuous secularisation, sees a decline in religious transmission and institutional belonging, leading to a more secular society. This perspective is supported by British sociologist Steve Bruce and Swiss sociologist Jörg Stolz, both of whom suggest a pessimistic outlook for religion's future due to the lack of generational transmission. In contrast,

post-secularisation, as argued by the late Peter Berger, suggests a potential resurgence of religion in response to economic and ecological challenges, and cultural insecurity. This trend is evidenced by the growth of evangelical movements and the continued influence outside Europe, in a more radical mode, of major religions like Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

"In our society, there is not only one trend or tendency. There are two tendencies, namely continued secularisation and religious reaffirmation."

Portier himself aligns with the concept of polarisation. Reflecting specifically on Europe, he explains: "In our society, there is not only one trend or tendency. There are two tendencies, namely continued secularisation and religious reaffirmation." This speaks of a divided future. On the one hand, there is a segment of society moving towards secularism,

and on the other, a group reaffirming religious orthodoxy in its two forms (institutional and informal) as a counter to secularisation. He elaborates, "So what I call polarisation is this division of the European society between two parts of itself." Portier notes that this polarisation leads to what sociologist James Hunter describes as a 'War culture', with secular and religious groups holding increasingly divergent views. It manifests not only in religious spheres but also in political and social realms, influencing attitudes towards immigration, cultural norms, and national identity. Portier accordingly notes, "There are more and more political parties related to the informal orthodoxy [Christian populisms], and on the other hand, there are parties [centre and left] that reflect secularisation and more openness to immigration and liberal rules. As far as institutional orthodoxy is concerned, it is generally more open to immigration than populist movements, even when they refer to Europe's Christian roots, while defending a more restrictive policy of intimacy than that advocated by secular citizens." Portier

adds that the institutional religious sphere in Western countries has become increasingly pluralised over the last few decades, with Islam in particular gaining ground. This pluralisation can also concern the secularised population: a minority of them defend theses similar to those of the Christian populists.

Furthermore, Portier compares these European dynamics with global trends. He observes similar patterns of polarisation between secularisation and religious reaffirmation in other parts of the world, including Brazil and Arab nations: "It is interesting to see that the movement I described can be seen in many societies, not only in Western countries." This global trend indicates a growing divide between secular and religious populations, each adhering to divergent values and worldviews. "In all religions, there is a sort of closure which attempts to separate the religious universe from the liberal universe," Portier further explains.

Politics and polarisation

Portier sees the polarisation of religion and society leading to a deepening entanglement between religious beliefs and political dynamics, not only in the context of Europe but beyond. Portier explains, "The sphere of political leaders is a reflection of what you can see in civil society." Portier references the polarisation in Brazil, where the religious and secular divide has significant political implications, affecting the support for leaders like Lula and Bolsonaro. He remarks that in Brazil, "there is polarisation between religious, the Evangelic faithful, and secularism." In other words, political landscapes are embracing the emerging divide, with parties aligning with either secular liberal views or orthodox beliefs.

"The sphere of political leaders is a reflection of what you can see in civil society."

Portier discusses the practical implications of the intersections of polarisation and politics on public policies. "As a result of this polarisation, there's very often populism that appears against the secularisation of society," he points out. "When informal orthodox parties take the government, then very often the policies change in three domains: towards immigration, towards intermediary institutions, and towards intimacy." When informal orthodox parties govern, they typically tighten immigration restrictions to preserve their values, align intermediary institutions like schools with their religious beliefs, and enact conservative laws on personal and family matters, reflecting their

specific moral doctrines. This change reflects a shift in national policy priorities, driven by the underlying religious orthodox beliefs.

Interculturalism

Portier believes that for policymakers, community leaders, and individuals, understanding the religious and cultural diversity of the population is crucial. It creates challenges in uniting increasingly disparate social groups. This, for Portier, requires thoughtful engagement with strategies that may foster mutual understanding and respect for diverse viewpoints: "I think we can find a solution, not by being a populist, but by being liberal in a certain way." Portier himself offers a potential solution to this divide: "interculturalism." He explains that "interculturalism is to accept the differences when the differences accept the liberal and constitutional views of our society," and offers it as a middle path between assimilationism and multiculturalism. Interculturalism is, therefore, a potential solution to reduce societal tensions. Interculturalism, he believes, can "make people happier to live together," acknowledging and integrating "cultural and religious differences within a framework of liberal constitutionalism."

Exclusion and the future

In his final analysis, Portier warns that without a concerted effort to bridge these divides, such as through interculturalism, societies may continue to fragment in the face of diverging



religious and secular values. He notes, "There is a gap between the different parts of society, which is a motive of concern: how do you gather these populations that are so separated in their minds and social practices?" He highlights the urgency of addressing the challenges posed by the current socio-political climate. "It is a very difficult situation today in Europe because you have a movement of exclusion," he warns. "Europe is becoming a fort that attempts to protect, which I find very disturbing." Whether it is the informal orthodoxy of Christian populists in Eastern Europe or defenders of populist secularism in Western Europe, there are many government parties that have founded themselves on excluding others: "Consequently, they can exclude people like migrants or Muslims. We are rediscovering the word of crusades in our societies." This also, ironically, leaves the conventional religious orthodoxy in a lurch: "Informal orthodoxy is not always in phase with the institutional orthodoxy - even if it can be like in Poland or Hungary. Very often, [Christian] populists say that the institutions are too liberal towards others [migrants] and are not realistic with questions of frontiers or borders." Portier suggests the traditional form of religious orthodoxy is losing ground.

"There is a gap between the different parts of society, which is a motive of concern: how do you gather these populations that are so separated in their minds and social practices?"

Human orthodoxy

Philippe Portier's examination of religious orthodoxy and the future of religion leads to a significant realisation. Orthodoxy, in its essence, transcends religious confines, emerging today as a fundamental trait which seems to be an efficient means to respond to the contemporary uncertainty.

The rise of informal orthodoxy, characterised by its individualism and subjectivity, challenges traditional religious frameworks by aligning with a broader social shift towards personalised and diverse self-expression. Herein lies the paradox: 'radicality' within informal orthodoxy, even if it leads to an authoritarian regime, is reimagined as a form of freedom. It reflects a pursuit of freedom in belief and expression, where individuals reshape orthodoxies to align with their personal convictions, embracing the structures of orthodoxy as a chosen path rather than an imposed one.

The polarisation highlighted by Portier, therefore, can be understood as diverse and deep-rooted orthodoxies existing in opposition to each other. His advocacy for interculturalism becomes even more significant in this context, providing a pathway to reconcile, much more than populist exclusion or integral multiculturalism, the varied cultural families in our societies. Interculturalism, founded on shared values of freedom and respect for individual beliefs, aims to bridge gaps.



Who is Philippe Portier?

Philippe Portier, born on October 25, 1955, is the co-director of the International Observatory of the Religious (Observatoire international du religieux, ORI), a joint research laboratory between the Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités (GSRL) and the Centre de recherches internationales (CERI). He has held academic positions at the University of Rennes 1, École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in Paris, and the Institut d'études politiques de Paris (Sciences Po), and has been a visiting scholar at prestigious universities, including the University of Stanford, the University of Ottawa, the University of Sao Paulo, the University of Roma, the University of Kyoto, and the College of Europe.

Portier's research is centred on the interaction between religion and politics, especially the concept and evolution of secularism in society. His extensive works, such as *L'État et les religions en France. Une sociologie historique de la laïcité* (2016), *La religion en France. Entre sécularisation et recomposition* (2021), and *Religion and secularism in contemporary France* (2022), look into the history and development of secularism in France and its comparison with other European models. Portier's approach is interdisciplinary, "I try to work with theology when studying religions and think about religion with social sciences, political science, and history." This provides him with a unique perspective on religion's impact on society. From 2018 to 2021, he was also a member of The French Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in Church (Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église - CIASE).



The independent commission led by Jean-Marc Sauvé revealed that between 2,900 and 3,200 paedophiles have been active in the French Catholic Church since 1950, uncovering a shocking scale of sexual abuse within the institution.





Economy, society, and religion: Revisiting Max Weber with Mathew Guest

Professor Mathew Guest, a scholar of the sociology of religion at Durham University, explores the future of religion against the backdrop of economic and social changes. Moving away from Max Weber's notion that religious life shapes economic systems, he suggests that neoliberalism significantly reshapes religious identity and practice. Guest critiques meritocracy for overlooking structural inequalities and reflects on religion's ambiguous role in social unity and division. He concludes by calling for careful ethical consideration in examining the interplay between religion and the economy today, pointing out the complex role religion may play in the future.

The interplay between economic structures, social dynamics, and religion is a topic of enduring interest and ongoing study. In an interview with the European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS), Professor Mathew Guest, a distinguished scholar in the sociology of religion, explores the relationship between these factors and what it means for the future of religion. Currently, he is the Head of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. He is also the chair of the British Sociological Association's Religion Study Group (SocRel), and his research emphasises the importance of studying religion as a lived phenomenon.

In this interview, Professor Guest brings his extensive expertise to discuss Max Weber's enduring legacy and the interplay of religious and economic forces shaping the present and future of contemporary society. He, therefore, offers a rich interdisciplinary perspective on the evolving role of religion in a rapidly changing world.

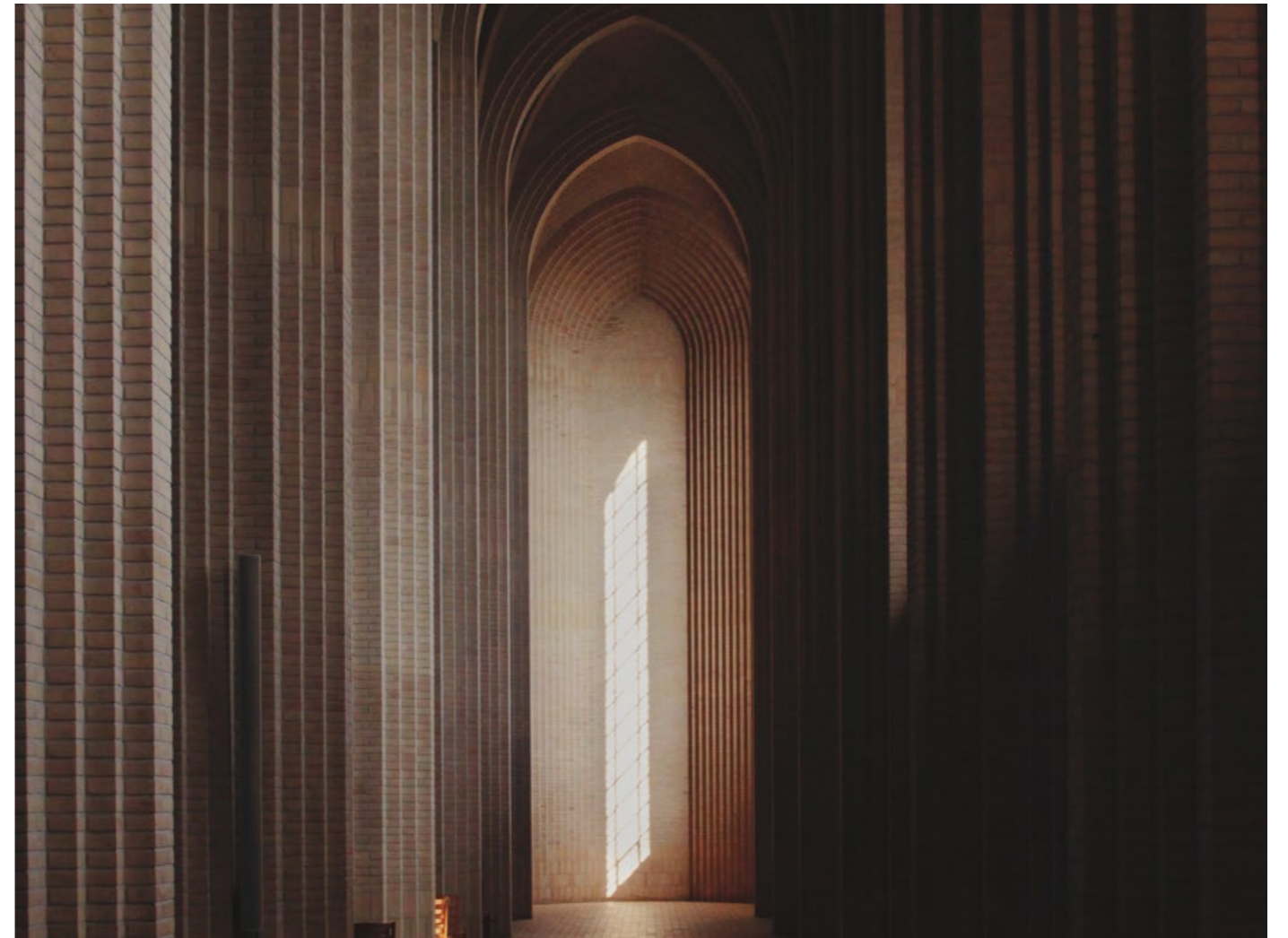
Weber's legacy in the 21st century

In his exploration of economy, society, and religion, Guest echoes the foundational ideas of Max Weber, a German sociologist known for his theory linking Protestant ethics with the spirit of capitalism. Weber argued that the values of hard work and frugality, emphasised in Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, significantly influenced the development of capitalism in the West. This intersection of religion and economics forms a cornerstone

of Weber's broader analysis of society and culture. While considering neoliberalism and religion, Guest resonates with Weber's examination of these themes. However, Guest is keen to point out, "Weber's argument is really about the correlation between the ways of thinking and acting found amongst certain kinds of Protestants, which align with capitalist endeavours." He identifies a shift in perspective, noting that Weber's analysis of capitalism as emerging from Protestant Christianity seems "a bit uncertain or difficult to sustain" when considering the diverse origins of capitalist practices and the varied expressions of Protestant Christianity that do not align with Weber's model.

"Whether you read Weber as enduringly relevant or as out of date depends on what status you attribute to the argument."

Where Weber emphasised the 'spirit' of capitalism as an ethos emerging from religious life, Guest extends this concept. He examines how neoliberal economic forces influence religious identities and practices. Guest contends that it is the cultural influence of neoliberal economics on religion, rather than religion's shaping of economic systems, that marks contemporary society. He articulates this relationship, saying, "It's that set of assumptions that I'm most interested in; how they find their way into broader spheres of cultural experience in various parts of the world and come to shape what we understand to be meaningful or successful religious practice." Guest notes that his book, *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the*



21st Century (2022), was developed out of a long-standing interest in how Evangelical Christianity draws on the language, resources, ideas, and methods that we more commonly associate with private business and market economies.

Despite critiquing its direct applicability to today's socioeconomic context, Guest acknowledges the historical significance of Weber's work. He notes, "Whether you read

Weber as enduringly relevant or as out of date depends on what status you attribute to the argument." Guest sees Weber's work as "useful to think with," suggesting that the subtlety and complexity of Weber's thought process are more valuable than the specifics of his conclusions. This perspective promotes an engagement with Weber's work that is reflective, not prescriptive—an approach that seems fitting given the current interplay between religion and economics.



The future of religion

Guest, like Weber, does agree that religion has a definite relationship with economic and social forces. He observes that the assumption that religion is a mark of societies lagging in modernisation has been subverted in recent decades. As Guest notes, the intersection of religion with neoliberal economics is particularly telling. The trend of religious identities adapting to the pro-market economy, which espouses notions of commodification and individualism, is becoming increasingly prevalent. This evolution mirrors what Guest identifies as the “elective affinity” between economics and religion—a synergy Max Weber keenly recognised in his seminal work.

In the context of future trends, Guest acknowledges a complexity that Weber’s early 20th-century perspective could not have foreseen. The binding of religious interests with political ones, especially in the form of populist politics, underscores a different kind of cooperation between religion and economics. In this scenario, religion becomes a tool not just for spiritual or cultural expression, but as a strategic instrument in the hands of powerful leaders. These leaders do not simply emerge as responsive to the collective will of their followers; instead, they actively create and shape their base of followers through the manipulation of religious narratives and symbols. This reversal of the traditional leader-follower dynamic signifies a significant

shift from Weber’s analysis. “It’s possible for religion to play an extremely influential and important role in societies across the globe when it’s used in particular ways by powerful individuals,” suggests Guest. In this modern context, individual leaders play a key role in directing social trends and decisions, leveraging religion to mould public opinion, legitimise political agendas, and influence national identity. This phenomenon reflects a new leadership model, where individuals do not merely reflect societal changes but actively use religion to direct and shape these changes.

“It’s possible for religion to play an extremely influential and important role in societies across the globe when it’s used in particular ways by powerful individuals.”

Therefore, religion’s future is closely tied to political, economic, and cultural forces. Guest observes, “It’s complicated, but it’s not incidental that many of these populist figures are also very pro-market and very keen on downplaying the role of the state and heightening the role of the private sector within their respective contexts.” The rise of populist politics, attached to religious identities, underscores religion’s potent role in shaping societies. This role challenges earlier scholarly predictions of religion’s wane in the face of technological and capitalistic progress.



The ambiguous role of religion

Meritocracy's role in social outcomes further complicates religion's future, a theme Guest expands on in his exploration of religion's role in societies. Reflecting on the intersection between religion, competition, and meritocracy, Guest addresses the role of meritocracy, which Weber might have seen as part of the capitalist spirit. Guest sees it as problematic, particularly when it obscures systemic inequalities, arguing, "It's deeply concerning from a political and moral perspective." This critique reflects a broader concern with how religious and economic ideologies may reinforce individualistic values at the expense of social equity. Building again on Weber, Guest argues that "the idea of life being governed by individual decisions, with rewards based on merit, fails to account for the structural inequalities framing the broader picture."

Yet, the question remains whether religion can be a force for bridging the widening economic gaps. Guest observes religion's dual role in generating both social divisions and unity: "Religion is very capable of working in both directions ... it depends on the actions of individuals and their harnessing of power whether they work for the good of their communities or whether they align themselves with interests that are working in the opposite direction." Guest emphasises the importance of institutions and their potential as engines for positive change, while also recognising the challenges they face in the current climate. He reflects, "It's very difficult in the current global climate to see religious institutions in a positive light without considering them as profoundly

flawed mechanisms for exploitation and abuse." To emphasise his overall point, Guest returns to the recent rise of populist politics. He refers specifically to the cases of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and the political climate in Argentina, where religious concerns are manipulated to garner support from a discontented electorate. These examples underscore religion's dual role in dividing and uniting societies, depending on how powerful individuals wield it.

"The sociology of religion, once it takes seriously the broader neoliberal context, has to be an ethical as well as an analytical endeavour."

Guest suggests that policymakers and community leaders should be vigilant about the ethical dimensions of religion's economic and social ambiguity. "Once you consider the alignments between religious interests and economic interests, between neoliberal assumptions and religious causes, then you inevitably encounter so many examples of inequalities of power, abuse of power, and marginalisation of the impoverished." This perspective underlines the necessity of an ethical analysis of religion that accounts for its influence on power distribution and societal structures, as he himself emphasises, "The sociology of religion, once it takes seriously the broader neoliberal context, has to be an ethical as well as an analytical endeavour." Guest's perspective, therefore, not only describes but confronts the power relations and ethical challenges prevalent in the interactions between religion, economics, and society.

A future without institutions

Looking ahead, Guest contemplates the uncertain future of religion in Europe and beyond. He states, "It's very difficult. I'm a firm believer in institutions and I believe that that's how societies can progress and enable opportunities to be sustained and developed for people." Similar to Weber, this reflects his belief in the value of institutions as catalysts for societal progress and opportunity.

Guest, however, suggests we might need to look beyond traditional Western societies or towards non-institutional forms. He elaborates, "We might also be looking at non-institutional forms of religion as those that thrive the most. I don't know what that would look like, but the influence of online communication, the flow of influence from the West into the global South, the uneven distribution of economic opportunity across the world, and the role of religion in populist regimes like the Philippines

and Africa, all adds up to a recipe of rather unpredictable consequences." As before, Guest's emphasis on how religious identities and practices are now influenced by neoliberal economic forces challenges Weber's legacy that economic life emerges from religious life.

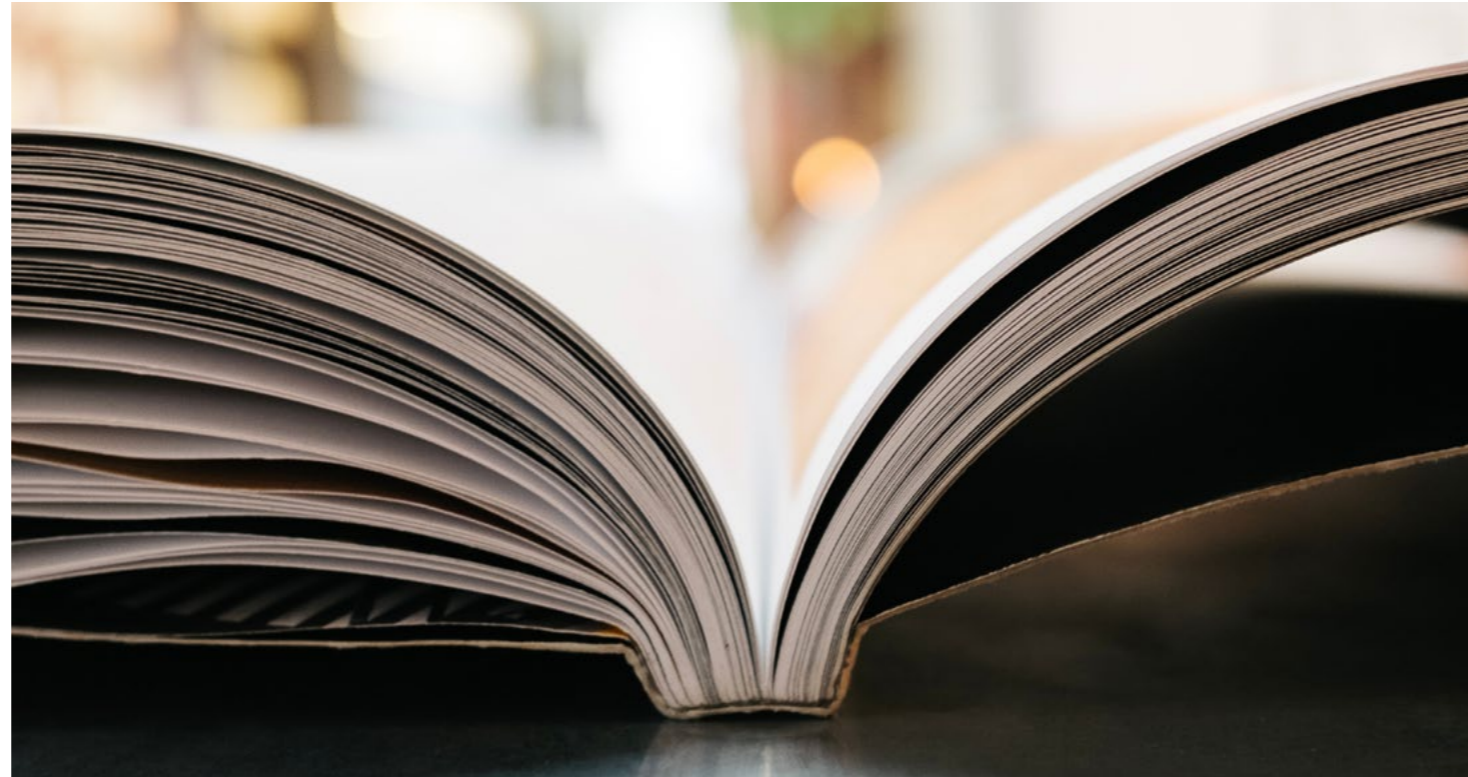
"We might also be looking at non-institutional forms of religion as those that thrive the most."

Reflecting on these possibilities, Guest is cautiously optimistic yet realistic. He speculates, "I don't know what will happen, but I don't think it will look very much like what we've seen in the past." However, he warns of a possible cynical future where religious institutions might continue to hold power despite their flaws, confronting a growing population of disillusioned secularists. He admits, "I wouldn't want to see that, but it's quite possible."



Who is Mathew Guest?

An accessible and influential voice in his field, Guest has significantly contributed to understanding the role of religion in modern contexts, particularly in higher education. His involvement in the groundbreaking 'Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England' project, the first empirically driven nationwide study of student Christianity in the UK, led to the publication of *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* (2013). He has published significant works on economics, society, and religion. His book *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the Twenty-first Century* (2022) notably focuses on how neoliberal cultural developments have transformed religious expressions.





Through the apocalypse: Graham Ward on religion's future in the wake of migration

Professor Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, discusses the complex relationship between migration and religion. He moves beyond traditional views, emphasising how both of these shape social and cultural dynamics, along with personal beliefs and identities. Known for his innovative approach to theology and religious studies, Ward's work has focused on the ethical dimensions within Christian doctrines and their connection with contemporary culture, psychology, and philosophy. His insights are particularly relevant in understanding the effects of migration on religious life and vice versa, especially in the context of Europe's diverse and evolving social structures.



The relationship between migration, religion, and society is not only a crucial area of academic inquiry but also the subject of public debate. Professor Graham Ward, the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, discusses this relationship with the European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) in a thought-provoking interview. Known for expanding the scope of divinity studies beyond traditional Christian theology, Professor Ward integrates a broad spectrum of religious, cultural, psychological, and philosophical studies to shed light on the complex ways migration and religion influence and transform society. Ward, drawing on his extensive experience in varied urban settings, speaks to the profound influence of migration on religious communities. He notes how it fosters inclusivity and diversity, providing insights into religion's changing role amid global migratory movements. His analysis offers an interdisciplinary perspective, enriching the dialogue on the future of religion in our dynamic world.

Migration and religion

Growing up in Manchester, Graham Ward observed profound changes brought about by waves of migration, leading to a significantly more multicultural society. Ward remarks, "I grew up in Manchester in the 60s-70s and the main difference was between Catholics and Protestants; then migration had to do with these religions and migration coming from Ireland and Scotland, causing all sorts of tensions." He notes that the initial ghettoisation of migrant communities eventually gave way to greater integration

and deeper understanding across religious traditions. Ward explains this: "When I had written a book on religion much earlier and drawn attention to these waves of migration, they were in part creating communities; they were ghettoised. But this began to change." Driven by a second generation of migrants, segregated communities become more integrated into society. He notes, "The second generation of migrants integrated much more into the cultural situation ... Racial supremacy, religious mixed classes, and racial dimensions were not dominant issues anymore." With this, Ward highlights the significance of cultural integration and how it evolves with each new generation.

"The second generation of migrants integrated much more into the cultural situation ... Racial supremacy, religious mixed classes, and racial dimensions were not dominant issues anymore."

Ward, however, emphasises that migration is not merely a cultural issue but also encompasses political and economic dimensions. He explains, "Migration is a very complex issue ... If the trend towards nationalist politics turns into rampant xenophobia, we have serious global problems." Migration, often perceived through a cultural lens, is, in fact, significantly influenced by political and economic factors. Addressing the interconnections between these factors, Ward states, "Religions will be in that mix because migrants often come from countries with stronger religious traditions than in some parts of Western Europe."

Visibility of religion in Europe

Ward believes that migration and evolving social attitudes are increasing the visibility of religion in Europe. He starts by critiquing post-WWII secularism in Europe, suggesting that such an approach has led to cultural wars and ideological clashes. "I think migration is raising the issue of religion within the EU - because what is Western Europe nowadays? There's an increasing sense of the religious," Ward states, highlighting how migration has brought about a renewed awareness of religious diversity. Ward advocates for a softer, more inclusive approach to cultural integration, where religion is part of the public sphere without being suppressed by state mechanisms. He observes that the radical secularism following WWII, aimed at integrating a European community, inadvertently set the stage for cultural conflicts. "When you start to legislate secularism then you have the problem of culture wars; ideologies that clash with each other," he notes, pointing out the challenges of enforcing a secular ideology.

"When you start to legislate secularism then you have the problem of culture wars; ideologies that clash with each other."

According to Ward, this approach often fails to accommodate the complexities of a diverse society. He explains, "Cultures are much softer as they work through creative relationships and can deal with assimilation." This perspective suggests that softer cultural processes are more effective in dealing with religious diversity than rigid state legislation. Ward

further comments on the relationship between migration, religion, and secularism: "Certain countries legislating secularism make it difficult when there is a new visibility of religion within the public sphere." There is tension, therefore, between secular policies and the visible practice of religion in public life.

Role of culture in integration

Despite his emphasis on culture, Ward cautions against a monolithic view of culture, advocating instead for an understanding of culture as shaped by micro-processes within communities. Ward states, "Cultures are assimilationist and syncretic. So, when I talk about culture, I talk about all these (micro) processes that go on between locations and communities, not necessarily in a larger monolithic sense that would be ideological."

"The difficulty is that culture is soft, creative, hybrid, and done through relationships, which makes it kind of easy to manipulate by forces that want to highlight aspects."

Ward's perspective considers culture as a medium through which integration and assimilation can occur more organically, without being forced by political ideologies. He explains, "The difficulty is that culture is soft, creative, hybrid, and done through relationships, which makes it kind of easy to manipulate by forces that want to highlight aspects." Culture, being fluid and adaptable, is a key factor in fostering integration and understanding among diverse groups.



Ward elaborates on the role of culture in accommodating different religious traditions and beliefs. He asserts, "People were not necessarily interconverting between faiths, but there was an increasing understanding of the moral stature within different faiths." This highlights for Ward the importance of cultural adaptability in recognising and respecting the diverse moral and ethical frameworks present in a multicultural society.



Future of religion

Ward envisions a future for religion that is deeply connected with societal changes, particularly in the context of Europe and globally. He foresees "an increasing awareness that people are religious and an increasing awareness of the diversity of the ways in which people are religious and express this." This trend towards a broader, more inclusive understanding of religiosity reflects a shift from traditional, institutional religious practices to more individualised and diverse expressions of faith.

One of the most significant trends highlighted by Ward is the rise of 'soft doctrine' religions, like mindfulness, which are becoming more prominent as a means to cope with global stressors. He notes, "Religions have always been part of a social therapeutics. In the wake of secularism and the rise of psychology, soft doctrine religions like mindfulness are coming more to the fore as a means of coping with stress factors around the world. Mental health is high on the social agenda right now." This trend suggests a move towards spiritual practices that are more aligned with contemporary issues of mental health and well-being, indicating a potential increase in hybrid and syncretic forms of religiosity.

Ward, therefore, foresees a questioning of secular ideologies and a deeper exploration of religious traditions. He notes, "The enormous climate anxiety causes people to think about their day-to-day lives ... I think with such anxiety it means there will be much more religiousness." In other words, existential concerns will drive people towards seeking spiritual and religious solace.

"In the wake of secularism and the rise of psychology, soft doctrine religions like mindfulness are coming more to the fore as a means of coping with stress factors around the world. Mental health is high on the social agenda right now."

"If there is a collective will and desire to see change and face the issues with migration, then we might see the need to approach the issues through the lens of hospitality."

It follows that Ward sees the future of religion as not just a matter of personal belief systems but also as a vital component in addressing broader societal and global challenges. He suggests, "The idea of increasing (need for) religious/mindfulness is thus hopeful, creative, and not too far away from having religious values that belong to traditions." This perspective indicates his belief in the positive role that religion can play in fostering well-being and resilience in the face of adversity.

Living through an apocalyptic future

Underlying Ward's views of migration and religion is his belief in the potential role of religion in fostering a sustainable way of living, particularly through the interaction between migrants and native religious communities. He highlights the importance of collective will and openness in addressing migration challenges. "If there is a collective will and desire to see change and face the issues with migration, then we might see the need to approach the issues through the lens of hospitality," Ward explains, underlining the significance of a community-driven, hospitable approach to migration.

He acknowledges that while religion alone cannot create international goodwill, it plays a crucial role in grassroots efforts. Ward notes, "The difference with religious people or people who hold religious values is that they help out with the victims; it's about how we share resources on the grassroots level to enable the maximum number of people to be minimally affected by the catastrophe." This perspective reflects his belief in the power of local, community-based initiatives in providing support and aid, especially during global crises.

Ward's view on religion's role in a sustainable lifestyle aligns with his broader understanding of religion as a dynamic and integral part of society. He believes in the importance of fostering relationships and support networks grounded in religious and humanitarian values, which are essential in creating sustainable communities. He observes a growing awareness of the diverse ways people practice religion, foreseeing a future with more permeable religious boundaries and crucial interfaith dialogue. This evolving religious life underscores the importance of prioritising relationships over rigid belief systems, as Ward notes, "The therapeutic nature of religion concerned, first and foremost, the quality of human relationships with respect to what transcends them. Doctrinal belief systems supported that. Not the other way round." Such an approach fosters more inclusive and empathetic communities, vital for embracing the diversity brought about by migration.

Ward's insight suggests that religion, when aligned with the values of hospitality and community support, can significantly contribute to addressing the challenges posed by migration. He advocates for a collaborative approach where religious communities, migrants, and native populations work together in harmony, contributing to the overall well-being and sustainability of society.



Who is Graham Ward?

Graham Ward, born October 25, 1955, is an esteemed theologian and Anglican priest, serving as the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University. Ordained in the Church of England in 1990 and 1991, Ward has held prestigious roles at Exeter College, Oxford, the University of Birmingham, and Peterhouse, Cambridge. At the University of Manchester, he was a Senior Fellow in Religion and Gender and the Samuel Ferguson Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics. Renowned for his progressive theological views, Ward's interdisciplinary approach engages with postmodern theology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, gender studies, and queer theory. His significant publications include *Another Kind of Normal: Ethical Life II*, *Theology and Religion: Why It Matters*, and *Unimaginable: What We Imagine and What We Can't*, reflecting his focus on Christian social ethics, political theory, and cultural hermeneutics. Additionally, his 2006 journal article *The Future of Religion* in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* looks at the emerging nature of religiosity and its new visibility in the public sphere, indicating long-reaching impacts on the study and practice of religion. As Professor Extraordinarius at the University of Stellenbosch and an active participant in various editorial and research projects, Ward remains a prominent figure in shaping modern theological discourse.





Completing our reality: Bénédicte Lemmelijn on women shaping tomorrow's religion

Dean Bénédicte Lemmelijn, scholar of Old Testament studies at KU Leuven, discusses the future of religion in the light of women's increasing participation. Moving away from traditional perspectives that largely excluded women's roles, she highlights how their involvement reshapes religious identity and practice. She specifically reflects on women's dual role in enriching and diversifying religious discourse. Lemmelijn concludes with a call to re-evaluate religious structures and norms, pointing to women's significant and complex role in shaping the future of religion.

The role of women in theology and its impact on the future of religion is a subject of significance and interest. The European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) explores this topic in an interview with Dean Bénédicte Lemmelijn, a distinguished Professor in Old Testament at KU Leuven. Lemmelijn, recognised for her expertise in textual and redaction criticism of the Old Testament, discusses the significance of women's participation in religious life. Offering insights as a scholar, author, and woman in theology, Lemmelijn argues that this participation not only enriches religion, but also fulfils and completes our reality.

Women, and the search for meaning

Dean Bénédicte Lemmelijn anchors her theological work in the universal 'search for meaning', connecting it with broader human existence and spirituality. "I chose to study theology because I wanted to do something with an intrinsic value, for God and his people," she explains, emphasising the deep connection between her scholarly pursuits and her desire to serve.

"I chose to study theology because I wanted to do something with an intrinsic value, for God and his people."

In her research, Lemmelijn emphasises the relevance of religious texts as dynamic reflections of human experience: "Even the technical research of textual criticism is not

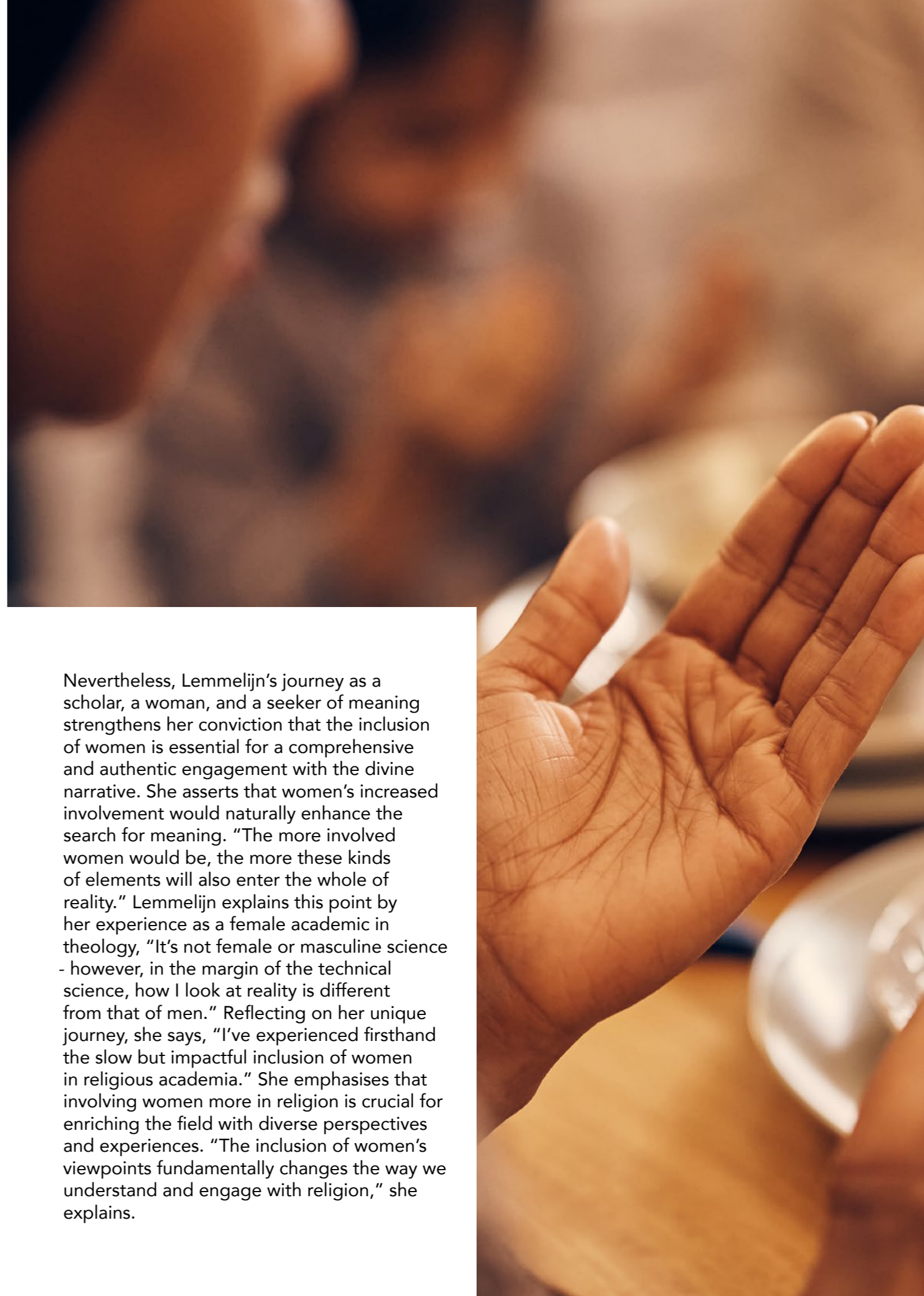
isolated. Through the critical study of the Bible and its textual forms and manuscripts, e.g. in the findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we learned that at that time, the Bible existed in a plural form and was a combination of texts from which people lived and not the untouchable text it has become centuries later." She argues that academic study of sacred writings must acknowledge their role in the lived reality of past and present communities, understanding these texts as ever-evolving rather than immutable.

"I've experienced firsthand the slow but impactful inclusion of women in religious academia."

Lemmelijn believes women's increased involvement would inherently enrich the search for meaning. "If religion can be the way of living and looking at the integrity of both a surrounding and transcending reality ... If we bring that perspective as women, then I think it can only be enriching." Lemmelijn, however, acknowledges the significant cultural and institutional barriers women have faced in academia and religion. She highlights this with the uniqueness of her own career within a traditionally male-dominated field: "I was one of the few female doctoral students in my time ... For years, I've been the only full-time female professor here. I have been the first female vice dean and dean, and [also] the first Belgian woman in the Pontifical Biblical Commission."

"The inclusion of women's viewpoints fundamentally changes the way we understand and engage with religion."

Nevertheless, Lemmelijn's journey as a scholar, a woman, and a seeker of meaning strengthens her conviction that the inclusion of women is essential for a comprehensive and authentic engagement with the divine narrative. She asserts that women's increased involvement would naturally enhance the search for meaning. "The more involved women would be, the more these kinds of elements will also enter the whole of reality." Lemmelijn explains this point by her experience as a female academic in theology, "It's not female or masculine science - however, in the margin of the technical science, how I look at reality is different from that of men." Reflecting on her unique journey, she says, "I've experienced firsthand the slow but impactful inclusion of women in religious academia." She emphasises that involving women more in religion is crucial for enriching the field with diverse perspectives and experiences. "The inclusion of women's viewpoints fundamentally changes the way we understand and engage with religion," she explains.





Women, and the future of religion

In her vision for religion's future, Lemmelijn stresses the need for evolution and inclusivity within religious communities. She believes that the active inclusion of women's perspectives is not only beneficial but essential for a comprehensive and authentic religious experience. "Religion needs to adapt and grow, integrating the myriad experiences and insights of all its members, especially women," she asserts.

"Religion needs to adapt and grow, integrating the myriad experiences and insights of all its members, especially women."

Lemmelijn observes a paradox in contemporary religious engagement. People are moving away from conventional religious structures towards more personal spiritual explorations: "I see that we live in a time of a paradox. On the one hand, you have fewer people in the church, fewer priest candidates, and fewer theology students. From the other side, I observe to a growing extent that so many people are in search of meaning in some way, through yoga, mindfulness, or meditation." She believes that this paradox actually creates more space for women in religion: "I have been doing yoga for 30 years and it's remarkable that there are far more women than men. And yoga is some kind of searching for meaning, so it touches somehow upon a religious dimension."

Calling this a "pluriform searching for meaning," she identifies three significant trends in this pursuit: the attention to the here and now, the longing for harmony and connectedness with both the surrounding and transcending reality, and the pursuit of happiness, fulfilment, and meaning. These elements, she notes, are increasingly evident in popular culture and align with the mystical and biblical traditions of the Jewish-Christian heritage.

"The more you include women, the more you get their proper attention and perspective, and the more it will be reflected in reality."

Regarding the role of women in shaping these trends, Lemmelijn returns to her own experiences as a female academic and

theologian. She believes that involving women more in religion will enrich it by bringing in perspectives that may have been previously overlooked. "The more you include women, the more you get their proper attention and perspective, and the more it will be reflected in reality," she asserts. Lemmelijn's vision for the future of religion is one of evolution and inclusivity, where the contribution of women is not just acknowledged but actively sought. She advocates for a religion that adapts and grows with time, embracing the diverse perspectives and experiences of all its members. "The future of religion," she emphasises, "is in its ability to evolve and integrate the depth and variety of perspectives that women offer, truly reflecting the diversity and complexity of our shared human journey."

Including voices in religion

Bénédicte Lemmelijn concludes with key considerations for policymakers and community leaders regarding women in religion: “Involve women in religion ... it will bring other aspects that may have been neglected.” She underscores the importance of actively involving women in religious discourse and decision-making processes. Lemmelijn directs her calls for an inclusive approach within her own religious context of Roman Catholicism. She challenges the Belgian church to adapt and become more inclusive, suggesting that women’s involvement would bring a more concrete and fitting religious experience that reflects everyday life. She believes that “if women would be given a chance, then I’m convinced it would be an enrichment,” but she is also aware that such changes in the church’s hierarchy “are not likely to happen quickly due to its universal nature.” Lemmelijn, therefore, advocates for a more inclusive approach, where women’s experiences and insights are valued and integrated into religious practices and teachings. According to her, diverse voices are not just heard but also instrumental in shaping the discourse.

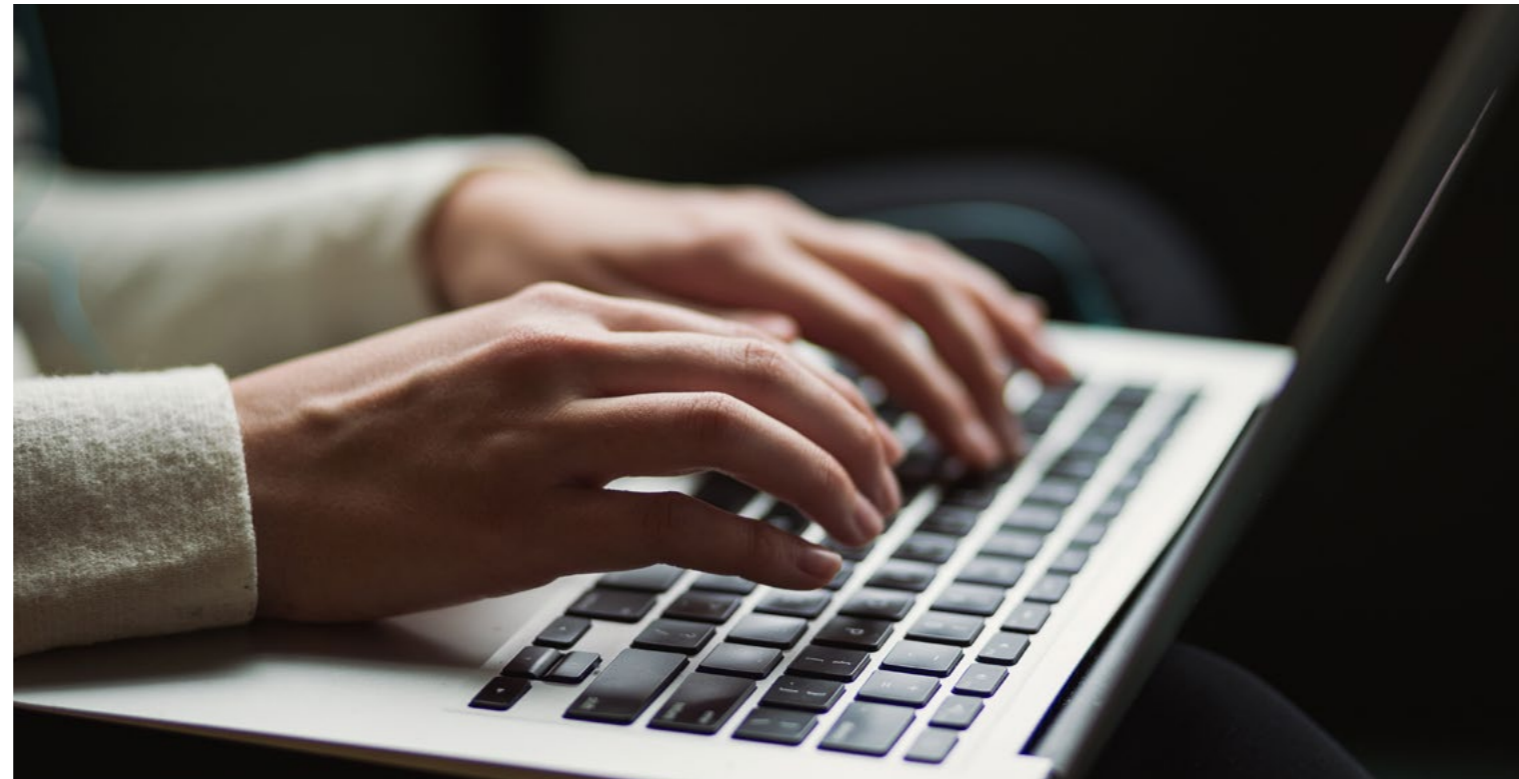
“All people also have their own sensitivities which we have to take into account.”

Moreover, these voices are not just limited to the confines of gender alone. Lemmelijn calls for recognition of the full spectrum of human diversity in religious life, emphasising the unique contributions of all individuals: “I should even be more nuanced because ... of course many people [are] on a continuum. ... All people also have their own sensitivities which we have to take into account.” Lemmelijn’s acknowledgement of diversity beyond gender is a call for a broader understanding and acceptance. Lemmelijn reinforces this idea by stating, “Each diversity includes the necessity of people and gives them both the right to be as they are and the right to feel safe as they are.” This inclusive viewpoint encourages a religious community that appreciates and ensures the safety and validation of every individual’s identity.



Who is Bénédicte Lemmelijn?

Bénédicte Lemmelijn is a Professor of Old Testament studies at KU Leuven, specialising in textual criticism. She has been the Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven since 2022. She is the Director of the Louvain Centre for Septuagint Studies and Textual Criticism and has been involved in various research projects aimed at advancing the scholarly understanding of the Septuagint and the Pentateuch. Lemmelijn has published numerous scholarly works, primarily in the area of textual and redaction criticism. The text-critical part of her PhD thesis on the Plague Narrative in Exodus was published in 2009 as *A Plague of Texts? A Text-Critical Study of the So-Called 'Plagues Narrative' in Exodus 7.14–11.10*. Another monograph on the redaction-critical aspects thereof will soon be published. She has also written in terms of science communication, through books and columns. Notable is the book on the relation between her personal faith and her critical biblical studies in *Mijn geloof als bijbelwetenschapper? Een broos en eerlijk antwoord* (2016, 5th ed. 2020), translated in different languages; and *Mindful geluk. Vanuit eeuwenoude Bijbelse Wijsheid* with editions from 2017 to 2023, examining the relevance of biblical wisdom in the actual context of a new search for meaning. Other notable works include *Een ogenblik. Gedachten voor de*



vier seizoenen (2022), collected columns, and *Verdiep je in... Bijbelse wijsheid* (2022, co-authored with Panc Beentjes). In addition to her responsibilities at KU Leuven, she has been a research fellow at the University of the Free State in South Africa since 2008. Lemmelijn's contributions extend beyond academia into ecclesiastical scholarship; she will serve on the Pontifical Biblical Commission for the term 2021-2026.



Picture by Hans Ausloos

A silhouette of a woman's head and shoulders in profile, looking upwards against a bright, hazy sky. Her hair is styled in long braids. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a contemplative mood.

Tradition in transition: Linda Woodhead on women's roles in the paradoxical religion of tomorrow

Professor Linda Woodhead MBE FBA FRSE, a distinguished British sociologist of religion and scholar of theology and religious studies, critically rethinks women's roles during modernisation. In doing so, she discusses their part as tradition-carriers against men's social roles. She also emphasises how gender is significant in religious contexts, and how alternative spiritualities and rising fundamentalism represent very different responses to changing gender roles and the family. Woodhead calls for better-informed and inclusive public and political recognition of diverse religious practices and women's importance in them. She offers a view of some underlying constancy within the religious landscape, despite the more commented-upon changes.

The role of women in theology and its impact on the future of religion is a subject of significance and interest. The European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) explores this topic in an interview with Professor Linda Woodhead MBE FBA FRSE, a distinguished British sociologist of religion and a scholar of religious studies, currently serving as the F.D. Maurice Professor in Moral and Social Theology at King's College London. Woodhead addresses the transformation of women's roles in religion, anticipating their continued importance and evolving influence on the future of faith practices globally.

Women and secularisation

Linda Woodhead's academic work has been significantly shaped by her early engagement with gender studies, which profoundly influenced her understanding of religion and theology. She reflects on this impact, noting, "At the start of my career, gender studies was a new, emerging, and very interesting field that was reshaping the way that we thought about religion and theology." Woodhead's research has paid attention to the role of women within religions in liberal democracies, especially those with Christian heritages, while also taking into account a global perspective.

"At the start of my career, gender studies was a new, emerging, and very interesting field that was reshaping the way that we thought about religion and theology."

This has led to significant contributions such as her article *Gendering Secularization Theory* (2005), which challenges the male bias in traditional secularisation theories by highlighting women's distinct experiences in modernisation and urbanisation. She explains, "I wanted to think about how different it was for women; the process of urbanisation and, at least for middle-class women, exclusion from public life and professional life ... Women carried tradition into conditions of modernity whereas men could modernise in a more straightforward way." Woodhead highlights how women were part of the process of modernisation, but not fully integrated into it, functioning as carriers of traditions, including religious ones. "They weren't full citizens of modernisation if you like," she notes, discussing how women's roles in socialising children and maintaining religious and moral standards in the home and neighbourhood contributed significantly to the persistence of religious traditions in the face of modernisation.

Abuse and other challenges in religious contexts

Woodhead is currently actively involved in a major project examining sexual abuse in religious contexts. Titled *Abuse in Religious Settings*, this AHRC-funded project led by Professor Gordon Lynch investigates the sensitive issue of sexual abuse in various religious settings. Her own work package includes interviews with long-term survivors to ask how they have survived – what has helped



and what has hindered. This project builds on her earlier book, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (2012), co-authored with Ole Riis. The book focuses on understanding emotions in religious contexts as socially-constructed and culturally-mediated phenomena, rather than looking solely through a psychological lens. This exploration of emotions, Woodhead notes, was “prompted by taking more seriously male and female experiences, and showing how they operate within different ‘emotional regimes’ that shape what they can feel and express.”

Woodhead describes the current project’s methodology, involving interviews carried out jointly by Woodhead and Jo Kind with survivors who disclosed their experiences a decade or more ago. The interviews aim to understand the survivors’ journeys, asking questions such as, “Do you still have your faith? Did abusive experiences in a religious setting lead you to abandon or transform your faith? What else has been important in your journey of healing?” We know from other research that perpetrators are mostly male and victims are more often female, but Woodhead points out that “some of the male respondents have said it’s more shaming for men to talk about and admit to being the victim of abuse, so numbers may be an underestimate.” Others on the project are considering, amongst other things, whether there is a gender dimension in institutional response to the abuse.

“We’ve seen a big ethical and cultural change in that it is now possible to talk about abuse and trauma.”

Woodhead notes that there has been a significant cultural and institutional shift in addressing these issues, noting that “We’ve seen a big ethical and cultural change in that it is now possible to talk about abuse and trauma.” This shift is underscored by the mainstreaming of the discussion around “trauma” and the need to “safeguard” individuals within institutions. Woodhead comments that “The media has done more than academics to bring abuse to light, and deserves credit for that.” However, Woodhead argues that addressing abuse in religious settings is complex and should not merely be handled through medical and legal frameworks. There is still a long way to go in understanding the effects of abuse in religious contexts, how to prevent it, and how to repair the damage done.

Women as carriers of tradition

Woodhead regards women both as religious innovators and, quite often, as carriers of religious tradition, in different combinations. She points out that women have outnumbered men in Christianity, until recently. She states, “Women still tend to be the carriers of tradition in the 21st century, but not only in the politically-recognised male-led ‘world’ religions; also in the kinds of religion or spirituality that go below the radar and are often dismissed as ‘superstition’.” Woodhead offers specific examples, noting the persistence of traditional practices like astrology, and internet-supported growth of interest in tarot reading. She observes, “In every part of the world and every religious



tradition, there are things like horoscopes, astrology, practical healing techniques, and various forms of divination.” In the West, women dominate. Woodhead highlights the consistent interest in these traditions: “If you look at the UK where we’ve got good polling data since the 50s, it’s a completely steady graph. Around one in five people visits a fortune teller or believes in horoscopes and this number is steady. The number is higher among women; about two-thirds are female.” Beneath the more commented-upon changes in religion, there is an undertow of activity, much of it pre-modern in its tradition, in which women remain very active, but which is sidelined by mainstream religious and secular viewpoints.



Women in a paradoxical future religion

Woodhead observes a continued flourishing of practical forms of religion, such as tarot, fortune telling, yoga, and mindfulness. Historically predominant in church memberships, women have been leaving the historic churches in greater numbers than men, and those churches have mostly been becoming more conservative, not least in terms of gender roles and defence of 'traditional' family: "Christianity has gone from being predominantly a religion for women led by men to being a religion still more led by men but attracting men in equal numbers."

"The biggest story of religious change in my career has been the rise of fundamentalism."

Woodhead then reflects on the broader global religious landscape, pointing to the major importance of the rise of fundamentalism from the early 20th century, alongside changes in women's roles. She identifies the emergence of fundamentalism across major world religions as the key change in global religion of her lifetime: "The biggest story of religious change in my career has been the rise of fundamentalism." These movements, she explains, are characterised by their adherence to a set of unchanging fundamentals, as well as exclusivity and the belief in possessing the

absolute truth, and imagery of a war between good and evil, truth and (secular) falsehood. The rise in fundamentalism overshadowed moderate and liberal religious forms and has become intertwined with politics, raising questions about future religious trends and potential backlashes within these conservative movements.

In this changing religious context, Woodhead highlights the role of women. She reiterates that although many women have left churches which retain male dominance, some remain carriers of tradition but now in non-mainstream religious practices, distancing themselves from major religious institutions affected by fundamentalism and conservative values.

"Women often carry these traditions ... they've carried them through from the premodern and they still are very visible and prominent, albeit constantly changing and adapting, as they always have," she notes. However, she also points out the lack of female representation in public and politically-recognised religious leadership, indicating a persistent gender disparity. Women's involvement is now more visible in non-traditional forms, as "the big religions have become more gender-conservative, now presenting themselves as counter-cultural."



Woodhead expands on this by discussing women's historical position in relation to modernisation: "Women were in a very different position in relation to modernisation." She emphasises that while men could adapt to and embrace modernisation, aligning with religious leadership and fundamentalism, women were largely excluded from this process. This exclusion resulted in women maintaining traditional roles, contrasting with the evolving male-dominated institutional leadership and fundamentalist movements, and likely led to their increased involvement in alternative forms of spirituality and religion.

Addressing this disparity, Woodhead advocates for a more inclusive approach from

states and religious institutions. She calls for greater recognition of the diversity in religious and spiritual practices and the roles women play in them, emphasising the need for states to be more critical and knowledgeable about religion to ensure genuine impartiality that includes women and minority groups.

Woodhead concludes by affirming the continued significance of religion in human life, marked by dynamic shifts, particularly in women's roles and participation. "I hypothesise that a minority of people, perhaps one in five, are deeply religious and spiritual and it really matters to them. I think that may be a historical constant. What changes is the social acceptability of religion..."

Woodhead reflects on the constant nature of spirituality and its changing social visibility and acceptability, pondering its future prominence in the political, cultural, and social spheres. She envisions women finding opportunities regardless of whether more conservative and fundamentalist institutions value their contributions: "Women will be creative, spiritual, and religious in their own ways in whatever sphere they can find; they're opportunistic. If the men in leadership want their gifts and skills, that's up to the men to make way. It's not going to really affect the quality of people's spiritual lives; they'll continue to find their own ways of doing things."

Woodhead thus emphasises the paradoxical relationship between these two dynamics in contemporary and future religion: the increase in women's importance in below-the-radar non-traditional roles coexists with the strengthening of fundamentalism in traditional religious institutions.

"I hypothesise that a minority of people, perhaps one in five, are deeply religious and spiritual and it really matters to them. I think that may be a historical constant. What changes is the social acceptability of religion..."

Who is Linda Woodhead?

Born on February 15, 1964, Linda Jane Pauline Woodhead, MBE FBA FRSE, is a distinguished British sociologist of religion and a scholar of theology and religious studies, and is the F.D. Maurice Professor in Moral and Social Theology at King's College London. She heads the Department of Theology and Religious Studies there, following a successful tenure at Lancaster University. Woodhead's research interests span a wide range, including religion, magic, spirituality, values and ethics, and contemporary religious and cultural change. Her work seeks to understand the decline of institutional religion, particularly churches, and the concurrent rise of alternative spiritualities. She is an expert in exploring the dynamics of religion in relation to social change, particularly in modern contexts. Among her numerous publications, notable works include *Unknowing God: Towards a Post-Abusive Theology* (2022), *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* (2021), and *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (2005). These works showcase her extensive research on the evolving landscape of religious beliefs and practices. Woodhead's expertise is recognised widely, earning her several honours, including being appointed as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 2013 for her services to higher education. She has also been elected a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA) and the Royal Society of Edinburgh



(FRSE). Her engagement extends beyond academia into public discourse, where she collaborates with journalists and participates in broadcasts on topics related to religion, culture, and values. Woodhead has also been instrumental in initiating public debates about faith, co-founding the Westminster Faith Debates with Charles Clarke, and significantly contributing to how religion is approached in schools and public life.





Envisioning the future of religion in a changing world

An analysis of the future of religion, based on the five interviews in this series. This analysis was written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil.

The European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) conducted a series of interviews as part of an ambitious project to explore the future of religion. Featuring scholars like Linda Woodhead, Bénédicte Lemmelijn, Graham Ward, Mathew Guest, and Philippe Portier, the interviews sought to examine various topics central to this theme. EARS aimed to collate insights from these scholars, whose knowledge in topics such as the role of women, migration's impact, economic and political influences, as well as orthodoxy and polarisation, is highly relevant. A key aim was to make the insights of these scholars accessible to a broad audience, enhancing the understanding of religion's evolving role in our contemporary world.

Each interview offered a unique perspective, with the scholars providing their distinct, even conflicting, insights within and across topics. In addition to highlighting these individual perspectives, the interviews also contributed to an overall understanding of how religion is being shaped and reshaped in our contemporary world, and the role religion will play in the future.

Religion responding to secularisation

Drawing from Woodhead and Portier, it can be argued that religions are adapting dynamically to secular challenges. Woodhead's observation of women as carriers of tradition and Portier's focus on the rise of informal orthodoxy indicate a landscape where religious practices are personalised and subject to reinterpretation.

Woodhead highlights the uniquely adaptive role of women as innovators and carriers of religious tradition amidst the challenges of modernisation. She notes, "Women carried tradition into conditions of modernity whereas men could modernise in a more straightforward way." At the same time, paradoxically, women have led the flourishing of practical forms of religion, like astrology and tarot: "In every part of the world and every religious tradition, there are things like horoscopes, astrology, practical healing techniques, and various forms of divination." Woodhead's reframing of traditional secularisation theories to include gender dynamics with her Gendering Secularisation Theory (2005), underscores that women are unique in this role, driven as they are by their distinct experiences of secularisation. She challenges traditional secularisation theories by highlighting women's distinct experiences in modernisation, suggesting that alternative spiritualities are emerging in response to these changes.

Portier sees society grappling with secularisation and religion with increased polarisation: "In our society, there is not only one trend or tendency. There are two tendencies, namely continued secularisation and religious reaffirmation." He emphasises the potential for increased polarisation between secular and religious segments of society. "There is a gap between the two parts of society, which is a motive of concern: how do you gather these populations that are so separated in their minds?" This observation underlines the growing divide between secular and religious worldviews and the challenge it presents for social cohesion. Portier's analysis



extends to global trends, noting similarities in patterns of polarisation between secularisation and religious reaffirmation in various parts of the world, including South America, and the Arab world. "It is interesting to see that the movement I described can be seen in many societies, not only in Western countries." This observation suggests a widespread shift in the religious landscape, influenced by both secular and religious forces.

The entanglement of religion with politics and economics

Portier's observations about religion and secularisation suggest a deepening entanglement between religious beliefs and political dynamics. "The sphere of political leaders is a reflection of what you can see in civil society." This statement indicates how religious beliefs are increasingly influencing political ideologies and vice versa, particularly in contexts where polarisation is evident. Portier's insights highlight how religion is both shaping and being shaped by socio-political forces, especially in the context of rising religious populism and nationalism. Portier's examination of the polarisation in European society clearly points to the increasing involvement of religion in political movements. He explains, "There are more and more political parties related to the informal orthodoxy [Christian policies]." This trend suggests a future where religion plays a crucial role in shaping national identities and policy decisions, both uniting and dividing societies. This observation reflects a growing polarisation between religious and secular segments

of society, which is increasingly influencing political and social spheres.

Guest, in his discussion, extends the entanglement of religion beyond politics to economics. Critiquing Max Weber's ideas that religious life shapes economic systems, he suggested instead that neoliberalism reshapes religious identity and practice. Neoliberalism, he argues, is "that set of assumptions that ... find their way into broader spheres of cultural experience in various parts of the world and come to shape what we understand to be meaningful or successful religious practice." This insight suggests a significant interplay between economic ideologies and religious expressions, indicating that the future of religion is increasingly being shaped by neoliberal economic forces. Similar to Portier, Guest also discusses religion's ambiguous role in social unity and division under the influence of neoliberalism. Religious identities are adapting to pro-market economies, embodying notions of commodification and individualism. This highlights the need for ethical consideration while navigating religion, economy, and politics. Guest observes, "Religion is very capable of working in both directions ... it depends on the actions of individuals and their harnessing of power whether they work for the good of their communities or whether they align themselves with interests that are working in the opposite direction."

In recognising the entanglement of religion with politics and economics, Portier and Guest offer perspectives that are arguably distinctly pessimistic, about both the present and the future. By underlining the profound



impact economic factors have on religious identity and practice, Guest's perspective on neoliberalism and religion is also sombre. Neoliberalism, a form of market-driven economics that promotes privatisation, deregulation, and a reduced role for the state, is intricately linked with the rise of contemporary religious movements and identities: "Neoliberal economics influences how our lives on a cultural level and then in turn how those cultural experiences come to involve religion and religious identities as well." Guest in particular highlights how neoliberal ideologies shape Evangelical Christian identity. In discussing his book, *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the 21st Century*, Guest states, "The book developed out of a long-standing interest in the ways in which Evangelical Christianity draws on the language, resources, ideas, and methods that we more commonly associate with private business and market economies." In Evangelical Christianity, and Christianity more broadly, Guest observes a notable alignment between religious identity and right-wing politics within the context of populism. He points out that many populist figures, who are generally pro-market and anti-state intervention, utilise religion as a tool in their political endeavours. This trend is highlighted in his observation: "There's an increasingly prominent trend ... including religious groups that tend to treat individuals as consumers," adding that religion is becoming "an important component in [right-wing] populist campaigns." This phenomenon is reflected across the global political landscape. Guest notes that the election results in Argentina and in the Netherlands favouring right-wing populists reflect neoliberal "orientations to religion, which are

very important to their political identities." This analysis presents a pessimistic view of the future of religious identity, heavily influenced by neoliberal economic principles and their interplay with right-wing populism. On the future of religion, therefore, Guest expresses uncertainty: "We might be looking outside of so-called advanced Western societies ... we might also be looking at non-institutional forms of religion." His statement suggests a bleak outlook for traditional religious institutions, overshadowed by their inability to adapt to changing socio-economic realities.

Portier's analysis presents a similarly realistic and somewhat pessimistic view on the current and future state of religion, its relationship with nationalism, and the emergence of secularised Christianity. Portier's concept of informal orthodoxy is marked by personal subjectivity and a broader rejection of liberal cultural and moral rules, paralleling Guest's observations of religious groups treating individuals as consumers in right-wing populist campaigns. Portier elucidates that in informal orthodoxy, the "rejection of moral liberalism" also leads to "the rejection of political and social liberalism." So "radicality" and its "vanities," he concludes, prevail over "institutional opulence," whether it is religious or political. This leads to a form of radicalism that not only rejects moral and cultural liberalism but even the constitutional principles of society. "Radicality here is much larger than it is in the institutional orthodoxy," he states. Notwithstanding this, Portier notes that there is a significant trend towards greater radicality even within Catholicism, particularly since the reign of Pope John Paul II. This trend, he explains, is characterised by a stronger emphasis on identity, marking a departure





from the openness that characterised the Vatican during the Second Vatican Council. “You have in the Catholic Church the trend towards a much more important identity,” Portier observes.

This movement towards a more assertive religious identity echoes Guest’s observations about the intertwining of religious identity and right-wing politics, showcasing a social polarisation influenced by religious ideologies. Portier, like Guest, highlights the increasing influence of political parties associated with non-institutional forms of religion that he situates within his framework of informal orthodoxy. These parties often oppose liberal principles and support more conservative or nationalist agendas, mirroring the social divide between secularism and religious orthodoxy. Portier, therefore, predicts a division in European society between increasingly secular populations and those reaffirming religious orthodoxy. This polarisation, he suggests, will lead to what American sociologist James Hunter describes as a ‘war culture’, with secular and religious citizens becoming more orthodox and radical against the moral and cultural rules of liberalism. Portier’s view is notably pessimistic regarding the impact of this polarisation on social cohesion and governance. He observes that this growing divide is not confined to Europe but is evident globally, with varying degrees of intensity. In some regions, the secular population may dominate, while in others, the religious side will be more influential. This variation, however, does not diminish the overall trend towards polarisation. He notes, “You have more and more political parties ... related to ... informal orthodoxy ... And on the other part, some

parties ... reflect the secularisation of those societies.”

The significance of women

The interviews also drew attention to the integration of women’s perspectives in religious life. Woodhead’s critical rethinking of women’s roles during secularisation highlights the significance of gender in religious contexts and points out the dual response of alternative spiritualities and rising fundamentalism to changing gender roles and the family. She, therefore, calls for public and political recognition of the diversity in religious practices and the importance of women in them, stating, “Women still tend to be the carriers of tradition in the 21st century,” including in non-mainstream religious practices often dismissed as superstition. Lemmelijn similarly discusses women’s increasing role in shaping religion. Echoing Woodhead, she emphasises the dual role of women in enriching and diversifying religious discourse, stressing that their involvement reshapes religious identity and practice. Lemmelijn argues that women’s participation not only enriches religion but also fulfils and completes our reality, asserting, “The more involved women are, the more these kinds of elements will also enter the whole of reality.”

Like Woodhead, Lemmelijn believes that the simultaneous rise of male-dominated fundamentalism and female-led alternative religious practices will create more space and influence for women in religion. They are likely to not only lead the movement away from conventional structures towards personal

spiritual explorations, but also influence men and people who do so as well: "I see that we live in a time of a paradox ... so many people are in search of meaning in some way, through yoga, mindfulness, or meditation." Despite being optimistic about their evolving role in shaping religion, both Woodhead and Lemmelijn recognise the cultural and institutional barriers women have faced and will likely face in the future. Woodhead, for example, says, "The biggest story of religious change in my career has been the rise of fundamentalism." This leads to a complex landscape where women's roles in religion are not only influential but also constrained by institutional dynamics. In many of the male-dominated institutions that represent rising fundamentalism, Woodhead notes, women face sexual abuse.

Both Woodhead and Lemmelijn, therefore, advocate for more inclusive approaches in religious contexts. Woodhead calls for greater recognition of diverse religious practices and the roles women play in them, emphasising the need for states to be more critical and knowledgeable about religion. Lemmelijn echoes this sentiment, stressing the importance of involving women in religion to bring other aspects that may have been neglected.

While recognising the insights of Woodhead and Lemmelijn, it is crucial to also understand that the increasing significance of women in religious contexts does not necessarily equate to a move beyond orthodoxy and

fundamentalism into richer or alternative forms of religious life. This complexity is evident in contemporary movements like the 'tradwives', which advocate for traditional, conservative family roles. The 'tradwife' phenomenon, known for its idealised representations of domestic life, challenges the notion that women uniformly foster progressive or softer aspects in religion¹. While diverse, this movement includes a far-right faction that perceives contemporary society as decadent and promiscuous, undermining what they see as the integrity of the white race. Far-right 'tradwives' advocate a return to traditional gender roles and accentuated notions of masculinity and femininity. They argue that their roles as mothers and wives are crucial to the survival of the white race. This manipulation of traditional gender identities to advance far-right ideologies is alarming, as it legitimises women's subordination to men and justifies violence when this perceived natural order is threatened². Therefore, the 'tradwife' phenomenon, particularly in its far-right form, reflects Portier's concept of informal orthodoxy, revealing a trend towards personal reinterpretation of religious and social roles. This suggests a less optimistic outlook on the future of women's roles in religion, showing how such personal reinterpretations can reinforce traditional, conservative roles for women, challenging the expectations of progressive change and diversity in religious practices.

¹Far-right 'tradwives' see feminism as evil. Their lifestyles push back against 'the lie of equality'

²Far-right 'tradwives' see feminism as evil. Their lifestyles push back against 'the lie of equality'



Personalised and diverse religious expressions

It can be argued that the evolving roles of women in religion are representative of a much larger trend towards diverse and personalised religious expressions. Portier's reevaluation of religious orthodoxy, which distinguishes between institutional and informal forms, strongly supports this claim. Portier suggests that the future of religion might be shaped by three main possibilities: secularisation, post-secularisation, and polarisation. His focus on polarisation, particularly between secular and religious segments of society, points to a future where religious expressions may become even more personalised as they respond to social divides. "Currently, the movement in favour of the strengthening of institutional orthodoxy is becoming more important in many religions." This observation, for Portier, aligns with the trend of varied religious expressions, as informal orthodoxy, less tied to institutionality, reflects a more personalised approach to faith, contributing to the broader landscape of diverse religious practices. "Institutional orthodoxy aligns closely with religious institutions ... In contrast, informal orthodoxy, less tied to institutionality and normativity, tends towards radicality," he says. To be sure, Ward also confirms the shift towards more personalised religious expressions. Similar to Lemmelijn, he notes the rise of 'soft doctrine' religions like mindfulness as a response to global stressors. He states, "Religions have always been part of social therapeutics." This trend toward greater personalisation in religious expressions will increase as people, according to Ward,

turn towards spiritual practices that address contemporary issues like mental health.

This move towards greater personalisation in religion also appears to be closely related to greater diversity in religion. Personalisation arguably fosters individual interpretations, inclusivity of different cultures, adaptation to modern issues, reduction in rigid dogmatism, empowerment of marginalised groups, creation of hybrid religious forms, and the influence of technology. Ward reflects these possibilities in his discussion on migration. He argues that migration has significantly reshaped religious communities, leading to greater inclusivity and diversity: "The second generation of migrants [in the UK] integrated much more into the cultural situation ... Racial supremacy, religious mixed classes, and racial dimensions were not dominant issues anymore." This highlights the evolution of religious practices and beliefs in multicultural settings. Migration fosters a more inclusive and diverse religious landscape. Looking towards the future, Ward anticipates "an increasing awareness that people are religious and an increasing awareness of the diversity of the ways in which people are religious and express this." This vision reflects a move towards more individualised and diverse expressions of faith, influenced by global migration and changing social dynamics.

Religion and future crises

Portier warns of the risks of continued fragmentation in societies due to diverging values. "There is a gap between the two parts

of society, which is a motive of concern: how do you gather these populations that are so separated in their minds?" Portier also extends this observation globally, observing similar patterns in Brazil and Arab nations. He warns of the political consequences of religious and secular polarisation, particularly the impact on policies related to immigration, intermediary institutions, and personal freedoms. His commentary reflects the urgent need to address these challenges to prevent further social divisions. Concerned about this increasing polarisation, Portier advocates for 'interculturalism' to bridge the growing divide between secular and religious segments of society. To address this increasing polarisation between secularism and religion, Portier advocates for interculturalism. "Interculturalism is to accept the differences when the differences accept the liberal and constitutional views of our society." This approach suggests a potential pathway to reconcile the diverse cultural and religious families within societies.

Ward also reflects on a future crisis, but one less caused by religion and more by climate change. According to him, the impact of climate change is not only causing anxiety about how we live but is also likely to make certain areas uninhabitable, leading to significant migration: "Within certain parts of the world, living is no longer going to be possible in the same kind of way. The migration is going to be massive." He accordingly refers to the need for fostering a sustainable way of living and also developing a hospitable approach of native communities towards climate change-driven migrants.



Ward acknowledges the existence of “enormous climate anxiety” and suggests that this anxiety influences how people think about their day-to-day lives. He indicates that such existential concerns about climate change are likely to drive people towards seeking more spiritual and religious solace: “I think with such anxiety it means there will be much more religiousness.” Ward suggests that the increasing need for religious and mindfulness practices is a hopeful and creative response, indicative of a society turning towards religious values in times of adversity. He says, “The idea of increasing (need for) religious/mindfulness is thus hopeful, creative, and not too far away from having religious values that belong to traditions.” Ward’s observation of the rise of spiritual practices like mindfulness as a response to contemporary stressors indicates a shift towards hybrid forms of religiosity. “Religions have always been part of social therapeutics ... Mental health is high on the social agenda right now,” he states, highlighting the evolving role of religion in addressing mental and social well-being.

Ward also emphasises the need for societies to confront their comfort zones and anxieties to effectively address the challenges posed by migration, particularly in the context of climate change-driven displacement: “Let’s face our comfort zones and anxieties. And let’s weigh against what is going to happen. And let’s start thinking about ways in which we’ve got to change them to enable routes through.” Ward sees a significant role for religious communities and individuals in this effort. He believes that those “who are religious, who hold religious values, who hold that human beings are spiritual,” have a

unique capacity to aid the victims of migration crises. This support is not limited to religious faith communities but extends to all who are spiritually minded and who do not wish to see others suffer. He emphasises the importance of sharing resources “at the grassroots level to enable the maximum number of people to be minimally affected by the catastrophic.”

Both Ward and Portier provide insights into the evolving role of religion in response to global challenges such as migration, cultural shifts, and ecological concerns. Ward’s observations on the impact of migration on religious identity and practice, combined with Portier’s analysis of religious orthodoxy and its social implications, highlight the dynamic nature of religion in addressing contemporary global and ecological challenges. They both envision a future where religion plays a significant role in these challenges.

Undoubtedly, the roles of religion as imagined by Ward and Portier are significantly different. Ward tends to view religion’s future influence positively. His optimistic outlook reflects a belief in the constructive role of religion in addressing social challenges, particularly in the face of climate change. It can be argued that Ward’s perspective is indicative of his setting in Oxford, where religion is an integral and established part of the socio-academic fabric. In contrast, Portier, arguably shaped by the French context of strict *laïcité*, anticipates a confrontational future for religion in society. His view reflects the tension between secular and religious segments in a society strongly committed to secularism. Portier’s analysis suggests a more cautious and realistic approach, considering the contemporary



trends where nationalism often intersects with secularised Christianity, ostensibly defending Christian values. This perspective emphasises the potential for conflict and division arising from the interaction of religion and secular ideologies.

The increasing visibility of religion in the future

The various themes touched upon by these scholars highlight the strong likelihood of religion becoming more visible in the future. Notwithstanding religion's polarisation with secularisation, or its entanglement with politics and economics, there appears to be a resurgence of religious consciousness and diversity in European societies and beyond. Ward, for example, argues that migration is challenging the secular landscape in Europe, leading to a renewed awareness of religious diversity. "I think migration is raising the issue of religion within the EU. There's an increasing sense of the religious," he remarks, indicating the potential for more visible and diverse religious practices.

In this evolving religious landscape, Linda Woodhead adds a unique perspective based on her personal intuition and observation. Based on her "personal gut feeling," and what she's "observed," she believes religion is here to stay. Woodhead concedes that she "could

never empirically prove that hypothesis." This reflects her belief in the adaptability and resilience of religious practices, particularly among women, who, according to her, will continue to be creatively spiritual and religious in their own ways, irrespective of institutional religious structures. This aligns with the idea of informal orthodoxy proposed by Portier, where religion succumbs not to institutionalism, but evolves into more personal and radical expressions of faith that better navigate secular challenges. Guest foresees a similar trend: "We might also be looking at non-institutional forms of religion as those that thrive the most." This resonates with both Lemmelijn and Woodhead's emphasis on women acting as sources of alternative religious life, less regulated by male-dominated orthodoxies and more engaged with everyday life and its stressors, a point also highlighted by Ward in his discussion. These scholars collectively emphasise the resilience and creativity in religious practices, envisioning a future where religion becomes more visible and diverse, characterised by personal, informal, and adaptive expressions of faith, particularly among women and other groups traditionally marginalised in religious contexts.





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