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The agency of women in secularisation

Callum G. Brown

Secularisation confounds many faith scholars. Where once in the 1960s and 1970s it was accepted as a facet of modernisation, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed the rise of a desperate religious assault on the concept as in itself secularist and atheist-inspired – an intellectual conspiracy of religions' enemies. New theories abounded from the churched community to contain the intellectual threat: people believed but had stopped belonging; the mainstream churches were in decline but not popular faith; the parish structure of old Europe was disintegrating and making way for diversity – house churches, megachurches, pick 'n' mix faith; religiosity was giving way to spirituality; new age religion was dismantling denominationalism; and the majority secular people were now expecting the minority faithful to conduct the moral work of the whole community.[1] Though such ideas still keep coming, if truth be told, what is happening to faith now takes second place to what is happening with nonfaith: the rise of morality without religion, growing proportions of people identifying as 'nones', atheists and agnostics, and declining churchgoing and membership.[2] And most bittersweet for the churches in the west is the waning of the faith's most faithful: Christian women. Where once moral purity and sanctity of womanhood adorned the Christian family, feminist impulses have done much to de-sanctify morality.

Scholarship has been slow to perceive the concatenation of moral, cultural and demographic dangers that are unravelling the religious moral system hung in western nations upon female purity. New scholarship has already been sculpting this replacement narrative, and now Philip Jenkins' book, *Fertility and Faith,* offers the latest and so far most comprehensive demographic understanding of secularisation. The book inevitably must

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[1] Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco, Harper, 1993); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994); Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacrelization of Modernity* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996); Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000); Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007); Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2008).

[2] Callum G. Brown, David Nash and Charlie Lynch, *The Humanist Movement 1896-2021: Ethicists, Humanists and Rationalisst in Modern Britain* (scheduled to appear from Bloomsbury in 2022); https://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/#:~:text=Pew%20Research%20Center%20surveys%20consistently%20show%20that%20not,than%20Americans%20who%20identify%20with%20a%20specific%20faith.

refocus attention upon the gender question in the declining social significance of Christianity and Judaism from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. We should all be grateful for his redeployment of a social-science lens upon the decline of faith in the western world – broadly Europe, North America, Australasia and Japan, but his treatment also explores its consequences for other continents. But before considering the merits of Jenkins' monograph, it is important to restate firmly that the study of religious decline is not, should not and cannot be a demographic science alone. Without the fusion of quantitative and qualitative (some would argue postmodernist) methodologies, there can be no full understanding of the direction of the faith change that started in the third quarter of the twentieth century and which is now advancing – as Jenkins notes – with vigorous speed.

It has taken scholarship some considerable time to place demography as a major conceptual tool with which to study secularisation. The impetus began in the sociology of religion between the 1940s and 1960s, raising the prospect of understanding the changing constituencies of churchgoers by age, gender, social class and ethnicity. It was social class upon which European scholars focussed – arguably obsessed. Until the mid-twentieth century, the place of Christianity in the social and institutional fabric of the western world seemed secure, and it was taken for granted that the power of faith amongst the social elites guaranteed religion a stability that was, broadly speaking, undefeatable. Though research sometimes showed variations in the character of religion's hold amongst the social strata of western societies, the class-based understanding of religion's social position seemed irrefutable.[3] And, in the 1960s, as concern over indications of faltering growth, instability and decline in the social significance of religion was discerned and conceptualised in modern versions of secularisation theory, class-based analysis proved astonishingly resilient in the academy.

It took three decades, really until the 1990s and 2000s, before reconceptualization took root. Three things happened. First, in Europe it became evident that the steep decline in religiosity from the 1960s (broadly in northern Europe) and from the later 1970s and 1980s (in southern Europe) occurred at a time of spreading prosperity that undermined social-class explanations of secularisation both then and, for historians, in challenges to understanding secularisation in the previous two centuries.[4] Second, the United States' experience of the

[3] Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London, Croom Helm, 1974).

[4] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britian: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 149-156.

1960-1990 period awakened scholarship to a firm positive relationship between modernisation (including urbanisation) and rising religiosity dating back until the 1790s: big cities did not secularise faster than small ones, whilst agricultural populations could lose faith faster than commercial and industrial ones.[5] Third, on both sides of the Atlantic, new forms of historical and sociological explanation for religious change alighted upon cultural change. One was ethnicity in which, broadly, it became evident that secularisation had been an overwhelmingly white phenomenon –in Europe in which recent black and Asian immigrants emerged as the least affected by religious decline arising from the 1960s, and in the USA where ethnicity proved a better predictor of secularisation than modernisation, prosperity or urbanity. But a second cultural change became more interesting though controversial in secularisation studies – gender. Study of gender as a major factor in variation in religiosity arose in large part because it was closely allied with the rise of feminism in the academy. The literature on gendered Christianity expanded considerably in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, including notably in both the sociology of religion and in religious sociology (the latter being the faith-based study of the former). And from these studies, the levels of religiosity and religious culture have uniformly been found to be higher in the female rather than the male populations. In most Christian traditions, churchgoers have been shown by virtually every study from every period since the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries to be between 55 per cent and 85 per cent female.[6] In the Jewish tradition and other religions in which sex-divided ecclesiastical behaviour rules have sometimes been in place, scholars have almost always found women (especially wives and mothers) to be the principal upholder of domestic religiosity and standards of outlook.[7] Broadly, this position transcended ethnic groups, meaning that women were invariably the lead upholders of religious culture. In these ways, then, the processes of secularisation started to be divorced from modernisation theory and social class – though social science remained vital, especially in regard to quantification. At the heart of the new approaches was growing attention being paid to the place of women in Christian religion.

It is a deep irony that the infusion of gender into the reconceptualization of secularisation had an initial consequence of affirming that religious decline had been led by

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[5] Kevin J. Christiano, *Religious Diversity and Social Change: American Cities 1890–1906* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[6] Callum G. Brown, 'The people of no religion: the demographics of secularisation in the English-speaking world since c.1900', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* vol. 51 (2011), pp. 37-61.

[7] Rickie Burman, 'The Jewish woman as breadwinner: The changing value of women's work in a Manchester immigrant community', *Oral History* v. 10 (1982) 27-39.

white men; loss or neglect of religion and faith from the eighteenth to the mid twentieth century (and, it was rather assumed, beyond then) had been led overwhelmingly by people of white ethnicity, whether observed via transnational or intranational gazes. However, by the 2000s evidence emerged in many western nations that the proportion of nonreligionism amongst white people was starting to become gender balanced: in other words, the proportion of women in the 'nones' category was approaching parity with that of men (though most slowly in the USA).[8] In short, the evidence started to point to a further reconceptualization: that it was changes to female religiosity that triggered major decline in popular religiosity. When men had dominated the loss of faith, the decline in overall population religiosity had been restrained. But when loss of faith started to include women, the impact upon family religiosity – including children, grandchildren and male partners – was far greater. Without women, men more rarely attended church on their own. Scholarship started to isolate female experience as pivotal – demographically pivotal – to understanding the steep secularisation that broke through in the 1990s and 2000s in much of the western world.

It has emerged for some scholars that the central determining factor has been fertility, or more specifically female fertility, but it was erected upon a whole series of issues which affected how women made their fertility choices. In short, a radical change arose in the narrative of religious change in the modern western world. This narrative has been subject to development from a variety of quarters. The history of fertility is the domain of demographers, initially in a concept of a demographic transition dated broadly from developments from the eighteenth century though more sharply from the 1860s when the western world started to move from high to low fertility. Then the concept of a second demographic transition, first coined in 1986 by Belgian demographer Ron Lesthaeghe, pointed to the start of a spreading abrupt change from low fertility to ultra-low fertility that had commenced in northern Europe in around 1960-70 and spreading thereafter.[9] Though Lesthaeghe made a passing reference to a contributing cause being the faltering authority of the church over female fertility, the demographers were seemingly little interested in non-demographic factors. It took the intervention of historians. The present author was one, in Callum Brown, *Religion and The Demographic Revolution* (2014). Now, Philip Jenkins in *Fertility and Faith* (2020) fills out connections across a wide area of the globe.

[8] Brown, 'The people of no religion'.

[9] Ron Lesthaeghe, 'The second demographic transition: a concise overview of its development', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* v.111 (no.51)(2014) 19111-19115.

In Brown's book, four case studies were developed for Canada, Ireland, UK and the USA to show the sudden religious change that developed (at slightly different times for each nation) from the 1960s, taking the form of a rapid and sustained decline in the indices marking the social significance of religion: declining churchgoing, church membership rates, rates of religious marriage and baptism, religious identify and belief. The book then introduced data that marked the conjunction of religious change with fertility, and data likely strongly determined by fertility change: rising rates of sex before marriage (notably with multiple partners), contraception use, illegitimacy ratios (indicative of the changing meaning from the late 1970s of birth outside of wedlock), decline of marriage rate, rising median age of marriage, and rise of the cohabitation rate. Thereby, the book argued that the family was reconstructed in the late twentieth century – through later marriage, later age of women having their first child, and the dramatic falling number of children to women. Also in the argument was the rising role of higher education and economic activity for women, which produced strong positive correlations between female degree-holding and female participation rate (in the job market) on the one hand and the proportion of women who proclaimed themselves of 'no religion' on the other hand. In other words, women this evidence suggested a changing cultural environment for women, in which the spread of higher education and the rise of sustained careers for women (before and after bearing a child, and in increasing cases without bearing a child) reoriented women's life stance away from church teach and, in increasing numbers, away from organised religion. The emphasis of this work was to show the cultural depth of the change to women's lives resulting from the association between the new fertility choice and the drift away from faith. Meanwhile, in a second book, Brown interviewed women and men of the sixties generation who had lost religion, drawing out the gendered characteristics of religion loss, and in a third book on Britain examined the 1960s collapse of the dominant discourse on the pious woman. By these methods, a comprehensive cultural context was researched to refashion understanding of the way in which organised Christianity started to suffer egregious decline in western nations from the 1960s onwards.[10]

Philip Jenkins' book takes the task of narrating the relationship between secularisation and fertility to another level of study.[11] *Fertility and Faith* offers a distinctive contribution in

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[10] Callum G Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s* (London, Boydell, 2012).

[11] Philip Jenkins, *Fertility and Faith: The Demographic Revolution and the Transformation of World Religions* (Waco, Baylor University Press, 2020).

the form of a worldwide survey of the timing and progress of fertility decline. Organised geographically and temporally, it explores the spread of ultra-low fertility and steep secularisation, showing quite convincingly that the two have been activated in tandem. From his evidence, and from Lesthaeghe's work in particular, and notwithstanding the idiosyncrasies of ecclesiastical formation and establishment in different nations and territories, there seems little that casts doubt on the idea that symbiotic relations exist between religiosity and fertility.

But, what comes first – fertility or secularisation? Jenkins finds this an itch he is compelled to scratch repeatedly in this book. But all the while he veers to the inevitable conclusion that they are inter-causally connected. He writes of Europe: 'Changing social ideologies [like feminism] conditioned the demographic change and also accelerated it: fertility rates are thus both cause and effect.'[12] The chapter on Europe's revolution is the most convincing and textured on the nature of the connections, with an underlying philosophy that ideology, culture, and social trends galore contribute to the context in which fertility and faith are positively correlated – in the statistical jargon, associatively but not causatively related. Yet the author is justifiably bold. Whilst noting faith scholarship that denies that secularisation has been underway in a large portion of the world, he does note that '"Europe" became something like global normality'.[13] Ranging widely in forms of evidence – economic, religion, cultural and societal – the book draws upon a suitably broad palette of issues to apply the European narrative to the Americas, the Pacific Rim and large parts of the global south. Jenkins rightly deals in trends, notes late starters in low fertility, but emphasises (like the old Gerschenkron theory of late industrialisation that I learned as a young graduate student[14]) that the later the start the faster the rate of transition. Scholars in this field should not blanch from speaking about interactive causation: society is far too complex to be governed by one-way relationships. Jenkins might have imposed this a little firmer on his narrative, but the close reader will still see where the author's judgement rests.

Jenkins actually floats quite a number of speculative hypotheses around cause and effect. One such is his attempt to explain why Europe moved sharply (and first in the world) from low fertility to ultra-low fertility in the 1960s and 1970s, and alights upon a psychological impact to moving out of families with large numbers of children to families of

[12] Jenkins, *Fertility* p. 39.
[13] Ibid., p. 77.
[14] Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge Ma, Belknap Press, 1962).

few or (it should be added) no children. He alights on 'individualistic values' prevailing in low-fertility societies, in which people 'lose the ideological incentive to bear children'.[15] But there is much more to the issue than this, ranging from the biological and medical to life choices, and such circumstances need inclusion. Even then, room remains for cultural historians to provide depth to the analysis of cultural changes.[16] Though briefly dealt with, Jenkins is surely right to point to one measure – the ongoing collapse of the link between marriage and reproduction – as a major signifier of change. This too needs to be part of the matrix of interacting factors linking religion, secularisation and economy.

The book could not hope to touch all bases with detail. The area of employment and economic activities deserves more attention, especially since the literature on this has not been in agreement. The work of Evelyn Lehrer is important (though not necessarily always right) here,[17] but more importantly there is a need for the economic, individualistic and cultural drivers of female employment *and* declining religiosity to be examined. Jenkins' points to feminism (by which he generally means second wave feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s). But fuller note needs to be taken of discourse change: how the era of low fertility during 1860-1960 coincided with the ideology of female domesticity, and how the era of ultra low fertility from 1960 onwards coincided with the destruction of that ideology. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, moral standards were female defined – the moral pinnacles of a single woman's sexual purity and motherhood – contrasting with the moral dangers surrounding manhood – drink, gambling and womanising. From 1800 to the 1960s, men were pictured in public culture as western's societies' moral problem, women the moral solution. This changed when, in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, much of the progressive moral legislation concerned women directly (contraception and abortion), contributing to their rising autonomy and to the demands for equalisation of gender rights. In consequence, the secularisation that had for so long been seen as a modernist product of men's learning and achievement changed rapidly from the 1960s into feminised life stances – if you like, the leading strands of secularisation changed gender from male to female with devastating outcomes for the churches. When in the early twenty-first century many European nations

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[15] Jenkins, *Fertility* 37.

[16] Though see a contributing analysis in Jon Lawrence, *Me Me Me? The Search for Community in Post-war England* (Oxford, OUP, 2019).

[17] Evelyn Lehrer, *Religion, Economics and Demography: The Effects of Religion on Education, Work and the Family* (London, Routledge, 2009). For a critique of her position on faith and wellbeing, sample the work of Luke Galen in Phil Zuckerman, Luke Galen and Frank Pasquale, *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies* (New York, OUP, 2016).

witnessed close to the majority of births taking place outside marriage, it was clear that the traditional religious sanctification of motherhood was doomed.

At the end of the day, Philip Jenkins' book is a monograph that offers command of a very wide range of national studies of religion, demography, economy and culture, wrapped together in astounding geographical and thematic breadth. Whilst I would have wished to see the treatment of the truly remarkable transition of Ireland in the 2000s and 2010s from conservative Roman Catholic religion to liberal secularism used directly as a counterweight to the book's treatment of Poland (considering the case that the latter's conservative Christian heritage, too, could collapse almost overnight under onslaught from progressive educated feminism and youth), the volume as a whole is a masterstroke. This is the first time I have seen evidence of a faith-based scholar being truly honest in assessment of organised religions' recent histories and prospects. The author's grasp of widely-diverse national (and sometimes regional) narratives is admirable and utterly convincing. He can count (many religious historians can't), and appraises with assurance Christian and non-Christian traditions alike (*vide* his really good, though brief, treatment of Japan). The new global narrative he offers supersedes so much literature, bettering it all through a new evidence-based hypothesis, a wide grasp of economic, cultural and religious history, and honesty about the state of religious decline. But critically, he has accepted a game-changing central proposition – that religious growth and secularisation are not merely 'religious things' but demographic phenomena. This spawns the realisation that religion is too impactful to be left to the scholarship of traditional religious history alone. And it moves women centre stage in the history of religion, even in the midst of patriarchy. If students are directed to one book on the recent history and ongoing state of religion on planet Earth, it has to be this one.