INTRODUCTION

Religion in Times of Crisis

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The dominant paradigm in the sociology of religion during much of the second half of the twentieth century was that religion was in crisis, a victim of the secularizing powers of modernity and the hegemony of the nation-state. But in recent years it has become apparent that religion is alive and well all over the world. Religion continues to thrive in a variety of contexts, and especially in times of crisis, including personal, political, social and cultural crises.

Religion’s importance and significance is obvious even in Europe, long considered an almost-thoroughly secular continent. The contributors to this volume are all scholars working out of European contexts, and they bring unique perspectives to bear on how religion operates in times of crisis in Europe and farther afield. All contributors are members of the fledgling Sociology of Religion Research Network within the wider European Sociological Association (ESA), which was established in 2011 at the Bi-Annual Conference in Geneva. The consolidation of this Research Network confirms the increasing importance of religion as a subject for sociological inquiry in Europe. The chapters in this volume are a result of a call for contributions that was issued in tandem with a call for papers for the Bi-Annual Conference of the ESA in Turin 2013 around the theme “Crisis, Critique and Change.”1 This call resulted in papers that fostered lively debates around religions in crisis, including how religion provides answers to existential crisis, how religion responds to the crises associated with modernity, how crisis increases the salience of religious identities and cultural polarization, and how religion is contributing to changes in the modern world in Europe and beyond.

Such debates are salient in contemporary contexts, where modern science, the nation state, capitalism, unrestricted consumption, and the globalizing economy seem to have lost much of their credibility and plausibility. Cumulatively these amount to a “crisis of modernity” which has become even more

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1 We are indebted to our colleagues on the Board of the Research Network in crafting this call for papers, especially Stef Auper, and including Regine Herbrìk, Marta Kołodziejska and Anne-Sophie Lamine.
obvious in the wake of the global financial crisis. Even advocates of the secularization thesis acknowledge that crises and rapid social changes like these can temporarily motivate the popularity of religion (Bruce 1997). But religious responses to crisis are enduring—not fleeting. Religious responses are complex—not straightforward. Religion is also dynamic—moving across boundaries of geography and identity, and changing in form. As religion changes it has different social implications (Hervieu-Léger 1999). In some cases the voices of traditional religious groups grow louder. In other cases, we witness a turn to “believing without belonging” (Davie 1990), or holistic forms of spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Marti and Ganiel 2014), in which individuals cultivate individualized religious experiences outside of or on the margins of traditional religious institutions. Advocates of atheist-secular worldviews, like Richard Dawkins, cultivate their own anti-religious, “religious” followers. This aggressive secularism is countered by equally aggressive religious actors, such as fundamentalist Christians mobilizing on issues like creationism or anti-LGBT issues, or Islamists. So religion once again becomes important in the re-formation of identity and the construction of imagined communities: uprooted from tradition, modern individuals in identity crisis search for new (religious) values and meanings. At the same time, some European nation-states align themselves with their Christian heritage, long-standing traditions and religious pasts (Koenig and Wolf 2013, Portier 2013). These processes may be accompanied by a rise in alarmist discourses about the return of religions and particularly the “Islamization of Europe.” The chapters in this volume illustrate in specific cases how religion has responded to the crisis of modernity, and how religion has negotiated crises with and within nation-states.

Our first four chapters explore how religion has engaged with the “crisis of modernity.” Tom Wagner’s chapter is located in discussions of the crises of capitalism and neo-liberalism in late modernity, including how religious actors, especially in “evangelical growth churches” (Maddox 2013), come to be regarded as “consumers” of religious products. He analyzes the global brand that is Hillsong Church, an Australian-based organization that has affiliated congregations throughout the world. His work is rooted in a Hillsong congregation in London, where his fieldwork included an ethnomusicological approach. Observing congregants’ interaction with the Hillsong brand, especially through its music and star musicians, Wagner writes about people engaged in a process of “prosumption.” Prosumption is a process where people use materials provided by the organization to create meaningful “user-generated content” that both expresses and shapes their values. Wagner presents a complex picture of how an evangelical brand can appeal to, and be used by, different