Introduction

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It is seemingly the vogue to decree that in no uncertain manner religion is back on the academic agenda. There are various reasons for this sea change in scholarly outlook. Perhaps, above all, the prophetic assertion that religion traversed a path of inevitable decay in the face of modernity, and its accompanying ‘project of progress’ journeyed a trajectory of secularism, proved to be erroneous. At the very least recent reappraisals spawn recognition that the relationship is complex and diverse in the context of globalisation and the dynamics of ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000). Thus conventional theories of secularisation have been heavily critiqued or befallen ever more nuanced appraisal. Furthermore, fresh scholarship, exemplified by the writings of Talad Asad (1993), has sought to deconstruct how theories of secularisation themselves became entwined with a dedication to ‘secularism’ as an ideological construct and almost an article of faith, subsequently working their way from a descriptive to a normative discourse ingrained in the prevailing paradigm of the academe.

The subsequent ‘rediscovery’ of religion is largely generated by an acknowledgement that religion is not peripheral to global societies, even modernising ones. In the early twenty-first century a point of recognition has been reached which accepts that religion cannot be passed over in any analysis of the features forging human motivation and purpose. In many regions of the world religion is cherished as a source of identity infusing the everyday lives of millions of people as it always has done, informing different aspects of their existence and, in the words of Clifford Geertz (1973: 30), fashioning an integral part of the ‘symbolic dimensions of social action’ through which human beings render the world meaningful and their experience of it significant within a transcendental frame of reference.

For decades accounts of secularisation laboured under the perennial handicap of tunnel visioning partly inflicted by undue focus on Christianity, and Western variants at that, rather than other religious traditions or what have hitherto been categorised problematically as ‘World Religions’. A singular indisputable consequence was that the decline-of-religion thesis became rendered almost synonymous with the corrosion of Christianity in the Western hemisphere. This subsequently proved to be largely true of developments in Europe, yet even then with extraordinary complexity and variation. North America, moreover, seemed to remain a kind of exception for specific historical reasons (Davie 2002; Martin 2010).
The initial emphasis on the Western world was in many ways reasonable. Christianity begged attention because it represented the first major religion forced to confront modernity and all the social transformations wrought in its wake: pluralism, rationalisation, social differentiation, individualism, disbelief forged via scientific paradigms, and so on. A rather contrasting emphasis considered the secularising impulses which could be detected via certain historical expressions within the faith itself. Such a thesis was to be found in the seminal work of Max Weber (1965) and later the influential writings of Peter Berger (1973), both of whom excavated the rationalising tendencies associated with particular this-worldly forms of Protestant Christianity (and certain non-mystical elements of ancient Judaism they inherited) that contributed towards the making of modernity and which subsequently fed back and devoured the edifice of a dominant Christian worldview.

**Studying Christianity**

Today it is not infrequently asserted that Christianity, the largest religion in the world by various indices (including approximately 2.2 billion adherents according to the Pew Forum Survey 2011), is ‘over studied’. But numerous ‘blind spots’ still remain. The growing academic interest in religion has at least partially been spurred by its increasing public visibility and concerns over its social consequences, not least of all the repercussions of religious revival in Islamic heartlands, the implications of Islamic diaspora in the West, and present and future potential perils of Islamic fundamentalism. Such an advance has tended to generate an assumption that Christianity’s worldwide influence is waning as Islam’s impact, especially in the political sphere, proliferates. This conjecture has often obscured not only the growth of Christianity but global trends and counter-trends within its ‘traditional’ streams—Roman Catholicism, the Orthodox Church, and the many outcrops of Protestantism—as they continue to negotiate modernity or if preferred, post-modernity. Similarly, the spotlight on Islam has tended to draw attention away from the revitalisation and resurgence of less conventional forms of Christianity and their rapid propagation in areas of the world not previously associated with the faith. To this, can be added significant changes in allegiance to these innovating expressions of Christianity, notably in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where the more customary varieties of the religion previously had deep roots. Collectively, these developments are truly global, offering a compass needle pointing towards monumental, unprecedented, and composite dynamics associated with globalisation. Crucial questions subsequently emerge. Where