Religious Speech: The Ineffable Nature of Religious Communication in the Information Age
Bryan S. Turner
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Religious Speech
The Ineffable Nature of Religious Communication in the Information Age

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Abstract
In recent years, sociologists have been much concerned with the nature of communication and its consequences, but little attention, even in the sociology of religion, has been given to the idea of communication between human society and other worlds. Divine communication is sociologically interesting as a communication puzzle: authentic religious communication tends to be ineffable and hence it requires considerable intellectual work by experts to translate it into the effable domain. The ineffability of religious inspiration is associated with hierarchical structures in societies with high illiteracy, because the untutored laity cannot readily interpret such messages expertly. The arrival of an information society and extensive literacy presupposes some degree of democratization and in particular an emphasis on – to conjure up a word strangely missing from modern English – effability. This transition from the hierarchical/ineffable to the horizontal/effable implies a profound change in systems of authority in society and hence a transformation of the relationships between formal and popular religion.

Key words
authority ■ communication ■ deathworks ■ ineffability ■ media of exchange ■ spirituality

Thus the language of myth is in a sense closed or self-supporting. People become participants in this communication system through initiation or conversion and not through a smooth transition and translation from the secular system of signs. (Kolakowski, 2001: 168)
Sociology broadly defined consists in the study of social interaction involving the exchange of meaning, symbols, values, objects and occasionally persons. At the core of this notion of exchange is language, and hence there has always been a close proximity between the philosophy of language and social theory. Recent critical theorists such as Jürgen Habermas have sought to construct the whole edifice of a normative social theory on the idea of communicative acts. This definition of sociology is of course hardly controversial, but the very ordinariness of this definition points to some interesting gaps in contemporary sociological theory. The first is that it takes the social actor for granted, but what is a social actor, or, more specifically, can immaterial agents (ghosts, spirits, angels or gods) communicate? The second question is how do communicative systems manage the ineffable nature of religious speech? Religion is interesting from the point of view of a (secular) sociology of social action, because the communication of religious truths is typically ineffable and hence religious systems tend to require a stratum of intermediaries (such as theologians and other intellectuals) to interpret and translate the ineffable meaning of sacred realms. Over time these divine messages tend to get encoded into languages that we now regard as dead and hence the whole panoply of interpreters (saints, prophets and priests) become the intermediaries who make the ineffable effable. Literacy becomes a key issue in matters of religious authority. As a result, translations of the divine word are often unavailable to the masses, who depend either on a literary elite that seeks to exert a hegemonic control over divine speech or on popular teachers or agents (such as spirit mediums) to render the invisible visible. Often there is a physical barrier between the sacerdotal priesthood and the laity as represented by the rood screen in mediaeval churches. John Betjeman (1958: 49), describing in detail the daily reality of medieval parish churches, commented that: ‘Heaven is represented in the chancel beyond the richly-painted screen, where the priest murmurs scarcely audible Latin and where the Body of Our Lord under the form of bread, hangs above the altar in a shrouded pyx.’ In the 14th century, the ineffable had thereby also become the inaudible. The ineffable nature of the sacred word in these traditional societies was the intellectual property of elites who could read and interpret Hebrew or Latin (or Arabic or Sanskrit). In Muslim societies, these literate elites stood in opposition to popular movements such as Sufism, in which the ineffable was rendered intelligible through ecstatic experiences, dance, trance or divination. Popular religion has through the ages involved an attempt to access the ineffable speech of the sacred world, often through material objects – such as amulets – and through the services of popular religious practitioners who are themselves typically illiterate.

In folk religions, the messages between gods and humans can be carried by animals or birds acting as third parties. For example, throughout Southeast Asia, communication between human society and other worlds such as the world of the ancestors is carried by birds. In this cosmology, birds stand for light and freedom, not being tied to the earth. While the
snake represents the underworld, the earth and seniority, the bird represents the sky and the feminine. Birds therefore play an important role in gender divisions, social hierarchies and in communications between dead ancestors and their living descendants (Le Roux and Sellato, 2006). Birds have the symbolic capacity of translating the ineffable, but this role is perhaps not confined to the folk religions of Southeast Asia. In New Testament Christianity, we learn in Luke 3: 23 that ‘the Holy Ghost descended in bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said “Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased”’. This baptismal event gave rise to the idea of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (parakletos), the advocate of the justified soul against evil forces or the Comforter of the Church. The pneuma or Spirit that entered Jesus in the shape of a dove gave him the authority to cast out demons and, with the eventual ascent of Jesus into Heaven, a Second Comforter – the Spirit of the Truth – would become the advocate of the disciples of Jesus. The Paraclete is thus the advocate who intercedes between the earthly Church and the Kingdom of God.

The symbolism of birds – dove, eagle and sparrow – remained important in early Christianity, often as intermediaries. But such symbolism from a pastoral and agrarian period makes relatively little sense in the modern world where ‘the cosmic liturgy, the mystery of nature’s participation in the Christological drama, have become inaccessible to Christians living in a modern city’ (Eliade, 1959: 179). The basic images of Christian soteriology – harvests, shepherds, the lamb and the dove – have lost their metaphorical force in a post-industrial system, because the shared experience of an ineffable mystery has disappeared (Turner, 2001). Children growing up in a modern city may never see a sheep and their interactions with birds are probably confined to feeding urban pigeons. What has replaced this shared set of experiences is a more individualized and hybrid religiosity which is compatible with consumerism and popular culture. These symbolic universes also have different forms of authority which I will describe in this article as a basic contrast between hierarchical and horizontal authority.

In the modern period, where there is greater literacy, a democratization of knowledge, and access to knowledge through the Internet, the sharp distinction between the elite and the mass becomes blurred. In a democratic environment, the very idea that some truths are ineffable contradicts the ethos of modern society in which everybody assumes a right to understand or at least to have the relevant information. Democracy tends to promote plain speech and political campaigns are based on personalities and slogans and not only policies. The control of ineffable knowledge is compromised and the whole idea of hierarchically organized wisdom evaporates. We are moving from the age of revelation to the age of information where everything is, at least in principle, effable. The resulting crisis of authority is perhaps the real meaning of secularization and, despite all the talk of resacralization, the world of deep ineffability appears to be doomed. Where is prophecy today? Where are the ineffable messages of yesteryear? While this article is primarily a piece of sociological analysis, it has implications for theology
and philosophy because it asks whether ineffableness can survive in a world of instant and incessant communication. It is very appropriate therefore that this commentary ends with the work of the late Philip Rieff since my argument can be seen indirectly as a contribution to the aesthetics of authority.

A Theoretical Paradigm: Media of Exchange

One of the few attempts in sociology to understand religion in terms of the media of exchange occurred in the late systems theory of Talcott Parsons. The notion of the ‘media of exchange’ grew out of Parsons’ voluntaristic theory of action in which people exchange meaning through the medium of language. The notion in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) that sociology is the study of action and interaction rather than behaviour carries with it the idea that human interaction is always an exchange of meaning, in which actors have to interpret the symbolic media of exchange in order to make sense of any communication. The difficulties in Parsons’ original formulation of social action theory laid the grounds for subsequent attempts in sociology to better understand the actual dynamics of communication such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

However, Parsons went on to develop his original action theory in *The Social System* (1951), to argue that we can understand the four subsystems of the social system (culture, personality, economy and politics) as connected to each other through various media of exchange. Politics involves power as a medium of exchange; culture, an exchange of meaning; the economy involves money as a symbolic medium for the exchange of value; and personality satisfies wants and needs through the communication of affect.

Parsons developed these notions further in his later work when he began to consider how these exchanges might relate to religion and ethical systems, and here he came up with the idea that what defines and determines the ‘human condition’ is the idea that life itself involves a gift relationship in which each individual is ultimately faced with the burden of life as simply something that is on loan to us and for which we have a responsibility. These ideas were worked out in a series of interesting papers such as ‘The “Gift of Life” and its Reciprocation’ (Parsons et al., 1972). Many of these papers reflecting on death, religion and exchange appeared in *Action Theory and the Human Condition* (Parsons, 1978). Perhaps one of the last attempts to spell out how the symbolism of gift and exchange enters into the modern world appeared in ‘Religious and Economic Symbolism in the Western World’ (Parsons, 1979).

Parsons’ views on the nature of money have continued to influence modern sociological theory relating to the economy. However, Parsons’ contributions to the sociology of religion through the idea of media of exchange have perhaps been less influential apart from the work of Roland Robertson (1970, 1978) and Niklas Luhmann. Rejecting the restrictions of the four-subsystem paradigm in Parsons’ work – namely the adaptive,
goal-directive, integrative and motivational functions of an actual society – Luhmann has also rejected the idea that sociological theory refers to human beings, but instead conceived the social system as consisting of communicative acts. Luhmann extended much of Parsons’ framework to examine such media as truth, love, money and political power. One of Luhmann’s most provocative contributions was to analyse love as a system of communication, especially a communication of the ineffable. In *Love as Passion* (1986), Luhmann showed how individuals need to share a code or interpretation to make sense of something that cannot be communicated when somebody says ‘I love you’. He also showed how the code of love has changed over time by becoming self-referential, thereby increasing its autopoiesis with respect to the social system as a whole. The problem with modern love is whether more or fewer life-long commitments can survive the need for individual fulfilment on the part of the individuals (Arnoldi, 2001). Luhmann developed similar arguments with respect to religion in *Religious Dogmatics and the Evolution of Societies* (1984). The medium of communication in religious systems is faith. Like love, religion deals with things that cannot be communicated and religion in primitive societies is carried through the medium of ritual as a repository of the ineffable. In what Luhmann calls the ‘religions of revelation’, the role of the Church and the creeds is to translate revealed wisdom into creeds that can be memorized and recited, and to organize a hierarchical system of interpretation through the training of religious functionaries such as priests. More could be said here, for example, about the nature of angels as carriers of otherwise incomprehensible meanings; their appearance can be interpreted by humans as conveying that their messages are ultimately capable of human comprehension. The most powerful image of such events in Christianity was the message of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary and the Visitation, when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, whose offspring becomes John the Baptist according to the Gospel of Luke. As Jean-Luc Nancy (2005) points out, *visitation* in ecclesiastical Latin is more than a mere visit; it is the procedure for becoming aware of something. We could say that in religions of revelation angels are inserted into human interaction when two incompatible systems – the sacred and the profane – collide in this-worldly time and space. In the Annunciation scenes from the life of Mary, the raised finger of the Angel Gabriel indicates a communication crisis, pointing to the arrival of a new code that will translate the incomprehensible into a gospel.

The word ‘effable’ (*effabili*) comes from *effari* or to speak out. Effable survived in English until the middle of the 17th century, but its use is now archaic. The ineffable is that which cannot be uttered. It originally had a legal significance meaning that which cannot be lawfully put into words. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the ineffable is the unspeakable, unutterable and inexpressible. It also carries the meaning from 1597 that some things must not be uttered. In religious systems of communication, therefore, faith is an essential component of religious life since the actions of God are ultimately unknowable. In Judaism, even his
Name is a secret; hence the use of the Tetragrammaton or YHVH or Yahweh. In Judaism the worship of Yahweh was ‘aniconic’, that is, without images or icons, and His personal Name could never be known. In Islam *al-Ilah* is literally ‘The God’ – the eternal and uncreated Creator of the universe and humanity, but Allah is not a personal name. In some esoteric traditions in Islam, there is the view that Allah has 99 names – such as the Merciful, the Powerful and so forth – but humans cannot know his hundredth name, which is a mystery. In Sufism, the ritual practice of remembering or evoking God or *dhikr* through the endless repetition of his Name and rhythmic breathing produces an ecstatic response (Nicholson, 2000). Communication is achieved through its embodiment in the repetitions of breathing and naming rather than through intellectual reflection.

Luhmann’s analysis of such media of exchange as love and faith is always set within his theory of the evolution of society, and in the case of religion he developed a theory of the secularization of religion that is parallel to the study of love. In his evolutionary scheme, there are segmented, stratified and differentiated systems. In the first two, the religious sphere operates across the various components of the social system, giving an overall coherence to society. In this respect, Luhmann follows Emile Durkheim’s account of social change in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1960). In a differentiated society, however, religion can no longer provide the general rationale for society as a whole, and it becomes increasingly functionally specific to the provision of what we might broadly call ‘human services’. These therapeutic services are provided to people who are to some extent the victims of the social problems that arise in modern societies. Luhmann’s theory of secularization therefore recognizes that religion becomes increasingly specialized as a quasi-welfare agency in modern societies (Beyer, 1984).

In summary, we can argue that, in the age of revelation, religious communication had certain key elements that defined what constituted ‘religion’. First, the structure of the system of communication was essentially hierarchical in the literal sense that meaning came down to earth from above. However, the social structure of these religious codes was also hierarchical, and there was often a symbiosis between religious and political authority. We might borrow a term from Max Weber in volume one of *Economy and Society* (1978: 54) to describe this structure, namely a hierocracy. For Weber, the state enjoys a monopoly of violence and the Church aims to achieve a monopoly of grace. These two institutions need each other, because religion typically legitimizes power and religions need the patronage and protection of political institutions. Because religious communicative acts were necessarily tied to general structures of power, the metaphors of religious language reflected the structures of power in a society. The metaphors of divinity tend to be couched in the language of an absolute monarchy. In ancient Judaism, the words for God reflect the idea of lordship. In Moses Maimonides’ *The Guide to the Perplexed* (1956) we find a discussion of the names of God in which
Adonay or Lord is commonly used to describe a being who is gracious, merciful and just.

In the Abrahamic religions of revelation, the messages of God require intermediaries who are the vessels of these commandments, moral codes and ritual guidelines. As we have seen, prophets and angels mediate between these ineffable communication systems, but there are strains in this system. Given the absence of God, there is a tendency for the system to require persons who can intercede on behalf of people on earth. Figures such as the Virgin Mary have become crucial in communicating between the wretched of this earth (especially women) and a merciful God, as we find in countries such as Mexico and the Philippines in the Virgin of Guadalupe (Warner, 1976). In Poland, the Black Madonna, Our Lady of Czestochowa, represented the suffering of the whole nation (Zubrzycki, 2006). On the other hand, monotheistic religious traditions tend to condemn any appeal to intermediary figures, whether angels or prophets. It is as if any system based on a monotheistic or singular source of all messages condemns any short-cuts in communication. Through such notions as idolatry and iconography, Judaism and Islam gave us the modern idea of ideology as a system of false communication or misrepresentation.

Finally, in the age of revelation a system of hierarchic communication has always given priority to an intellectual elite who are charged with the responsibility of guarding and reproducing a sacred language as the earthly means of divine communication. These are represented by the army of rabbis, mullahs and bishops who have defended orthodoxy against the vicissitudes of time and change. In the West, the logical conclusion of such institutional processes was the doctrine of papal infallibility.

Towards a Critique of Parsons and Luhmann

In attempting to create a theoretical framework for understanding religion in an age of ubiquitous media, I offer two basic criticisms of the Parsons–Luhmann schema. First, their arguments are primarily couched within an interpretation of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), namely religions which are monotheistic, revelatory and prophetic. We would need to make some important modifications to these arguments if we were to consider the so-called ‘religions of Asia’. For example, Buddhism as a philosophical system rejects the idea of a monotheistic creator-God and encourages human beings to achieve spiritual enlightenment without the trappings of a theistic theology. We might say that Theravada Buddhism sought to reduce the amount of noise in systems of religious and ethical communication. Similarly, neither Confucianism nor Taoism had any notion of a singular source of revelatory knowledge. Confucius might achieve the status of a god in popular Chinese culture, but his wisdom was not regarded as a matter of revelation. Hence Confucianism and Taoism have no need for angels.

Second, neither Parsons nor Luhmann gave any systematic consideration to the role of popular religion. By concentrating on the issues of faith
and meaning in religious communication systems, they were in fact primarily concerned with the elite and its world of sacred texts, theological systems and scholarly debates about the meaning and significance of revelation. In popular religion, by contrast, we might argue that meaning is relatively unimportant and what the laity demand from religion is health and wealth. Popular religion is typically based on an exchange system in which the laity communicates with a great variety of divine figures, objects or spaces through offerings that are designed to win the favour and attention of a pantheon of gods and goddesses. In exchange for such offerings, humans expect protection from disasters, the promise of wealth and the prospect of health.

Precisely because the communication system is ineffable, the laity depends on more concrete methods of manipulating divine figures and of making their wishes known. For example, many aspects of religion in Asia are concerned to communicate with the dead ancestors, to help ancestors and to receive the protection of these ancestors. The whole role of filial piety in Confucianism expresses this need for an exchange system with the dead ancestors and with the need to avoid ‘hungry ghosts’. Communicating with ghosts occupies much of the mundane world of popular Chinese religions; here is a religious communication system that is popular, local and diverse, with no sacred language and no system of priestly control (Ikels, 2004). Popular religions typically lack theology or exegesis of sacred texts because they exist in practices which bring about, or not, certain beneficial outcomes for the laity.

In modern Asia, Taoist temples still function rather like banks or marketplaces, and it makes sense to talk about ‘grey’, ‘red’ and ‘black markets’ in terms of the provision of services and goods (Yang, 2006). Throughout Asia, there is a large market for the production and circulation of votive money as offerings, especially in the Chinese New Year. There is also in modern Thailand an important local industry in terms of the manufacture and distribution of amulets (Kitiarsa, 2008). In short, the media of exchange in the religious market includes both actual and votive money, as well as other goods and services. The economy of religious merit as an exchange system between laity and religious personnel is deeply embedded in the economy of secular goods and services, and plays a large part in the politics of Thailand, where politicians have to make merit prior to an election.

The religious sphere is therefore stratified in terms of what Weber in *The Sociology of Religion* (1966) called virtuoso and mass religion. Whereas the virtuosoi are concerned with the interpretation and meaningfulness of religious communication, the mass are concerned with health and prosperity. The orientation of the masses to religious communication is pragmatic, this-worldly and utilitarian. As Weber says at the beginning of *The Sociology of Religion*:

The most elementary forms of behaviour motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented to this world . . . religious or magical behaviour or
thinking must not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct, particularly since even the ends of the religious and magical actions are predominantly economic. (1966: 1)

In the age of revelation, the elite could contain and occasionally liquidate popular religions, because the power of the elite gave them control over the temples, the sacred language and rituals. The main change that has taken place with the growth of new information systems in the age of ubiquitous media is that the power relationship between popular and virtuoso religion has been reversed. The struggle between popular and elite religion in the field of symbolic capital has given an important if unintended advantage to popular religious communication, which can now bypass the hierarchical organization of orthodox information. The principal thesis is therefore that the new media have brought about a democratization of the systems of religious communication in terms of both codes and contents. We can briefly consider this democratization of religious authority by examining some examples of popular religion.

Secularization and Popular Religion
There are obviously wide and porous boundaries between religious fiction and religious fact. Films and popular fiction compete spiritually and culturally for the ‘religious imaginary’ in ways that professional religious intellectuals and institutions find hard to comprehend, and even harder to control. To illustrate these issues, we might briefly compare two recent but very different examples from popular culture, namely Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, which came out in 2003, and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, which was launched in February 2004. The former irritated the authorities within the Catholic Church, because it became apparent that many lay people were attempting to follow the trail for the Holy Grail across France and Britain in imitation of the novel’s main story line. Brown’s book (and subsequent film version) became the target of some scholarly criticisms (Bock, 2004). *The Da Vinci Code* is essentially a detective story in which a young academic uncovers a mystery within the history of the Catholic Church in which the centrality of women to the life of Jesus and the early Church has been suppressed by ecclesiastical authorities. Part of the book and subsequent film involves uncovering the real secret that is, for example, obscured in Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of *The Last Supper*, namely that Jesus was married and has descendants. The detective story involves a struggle with members of Opus Dei and the eventual breaking of this ‘code’.

Both *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion* have enjoyed globally large sales, despite the artistic failure of the latter as a film. Nine months after Brown’s book appeared, there were 4.5 million copies in print and his other novels have subsequently enjoyed substantial sales. *The Passion* was also a major commercial success. Within two months of its release, it had accumulated box office receipts of around $387 million. The film was directly promoted at the grassroots by ministers of Evangelical churches,
conservative Roman Catholics and charismatic leaders in America. This marketing strategy had the support of local church leaders, who encouraged their congregations to attend, often through block-booking tickets. More than 1 million ‘witness cards’ were printed, circulating in support of the evangelical aspects of the film. The soundtrack was promoted by Sony Music and Integrity Music, and 4 million copies of the film were sold on the first day of its release. The Passion: Photography from the Movie has gone into its eighth printing and has sold over three-quarters of a million copies.

As a challenge to Christian, especially Catholic, orthodoxy, Brown’s book is controversial. For example, the claims made within the story have some affinity with scholarly arguments from within feminism and feminist theology about the subordination of feminist themes within traditional Christian doctrine and institutions. Feminist criticisms of the patriarchal assumptions of Christian theology have had a long history, from Simone de Beauvoir, Carol Christ, Mary Daly and Luce Irigaray to Julia Kristeva, and in The Da Vinci Code these feminist themes became one aspect of Brown’s story line. By contrast, The Passion was staunchly compatible with orthodox Catholicism, but it too caused public controversy. The unrelenting physical violence in the film has an almost pornographic quality, and it has also been accused of anti-Semitism. These controversies received some indirect confirmation in 2006, when police charges were brought against Gibson, accusing him of drink driving and the use of offensive, anti-Semitic remarks during his encounter with traffic police. Gibson’s subsequent apology to the Jewish community did not appear wholly convincing.

What these films have in common is the representation of religion as a powerful dimension of popular imagination, but they are also popular representations that circulate as commodities outside the official religious domain, and hence outside the control of religious authorities. Popular culture constantly appropriates religious symbols and themes, and these commercial developments are paradoxical because they both contribute to the circulation of religious phenomena, but at the same time they challenge traditional, hierarchical forms of religious authority and interpretation. In early 2007, The Da Vinci Code debate underwent a further development when Canadian documentary maker Simcha Jacobovici claimed to have discovered two ossuaries containing the bones of Jesus of Nazareth and his wife Mary Magdalene. These boxes, made from Jerusalem limestone, were originally discovered in 1980 in the suburbs of Talpiyot, but stimulated little significant interest among archaeologists. An inscription on one of the ossuaries – Mariamene e Mara – has been translated as ‘Mary Magdalene the Master’. Mr Jacobovici has created a film, The Jesus Family Tomb, with James Cameron, the maker of the blockbuster Titanic. The film caused immediate offence to the Catholic Church, which dismissed these claims as a ‘Titanic fraud’, and there was similar condemnation in Israel, especially from the guardians of the Holy Tomb.

Modern media contribute to a growing individualism that is very different in content from the ascetic individualism of early American
Protestantism. Of course, individualism is not an entirely new development and we can trace the democratization of Christianity to the Reformation, which did much to transform the hierarchical and traditional authority of the Roman Catholic Church. For example, religious debate in England in the 17th century was facilitated by innovations in printing that had the unanticipated effect of undermining the conventional norms of secrecy and privilege that had previously dominated political decision making (Zaret, 2000). The privilege of royal power ruled out any public discussion of government activity and supported ‘council’ (such as the Crown’s Privy Council or Parliament) as the only legitimate site for debate. The religious authority of Calvin and Hooker was invoked to justify the view that ‘private men’ had no right to discuss the public affairs of state. Furthermore, the point of discussion in council was simply to advise the monarch on matters of state and to provide an opportunity for petition and redress of grievances. Council did not exist to promote opinion as an end in itself. Communication between monarch and people was typically undertaken through church rituals, preaching and public ceremonies such as coronations, royal marriages and funerals. Within the Anglican Church, the pulpit was a political resource for communicating the king’s pleasure.

This privileged world of politics was slowly exposed to the disruptive impact of public opinion orchestrated through the medium of religious controversy. Printing was initially useful to the state in the distribution of proclamations and statutes. To begin with, printing facilitated and expanded the traditional role of petition as a means of communication with (and subsequently against) the monarch. However, competition between print entrepreneurs reduced the costs of production and expanded popular demand for news. The political effect of print presupposed important social changes, the most important being literacy, which was a consequence of the Protestant emphasis on individualism, the authority of the Bible and the education of the laity.

We need to be cautious, however, about treating the Reformation as unambiguously a precursor either to political democracy or to popular individualism. The Protestant emphasis on the literal truth of Scripture ran into the problem of competing and inflicting interpretations of Scripture, and we find Calvin in particular arguing against rhetorical interpretations and fanciful allegorization of the Bible, which leads to new and false revelations. To arm themselves against antinomian consequences, the reformers had to impose discipline on the laity in order to rule out the problem of falling into error and to install a proper discernment of the Spirit (Thysell, 2000).

The Reformation involved the confessionalization of religion, that is the fragmentation of Christendom into competing nationalist traditions, and the underlying social dynamic of these changes was twofold, namely social discipline and state-building. Churches were willing to collaborate on the oversight of their congregations, requiring them to attend church services, educate their children in Christian doctrine, and strengthen their faith
through visitations, prayer meetings and consistory courts. The result was ‘the moulding of more conformist, more disciplined subjects, more regulated states, more obedient lesser magistrates, more compliant clerical regimes’ (Greengrass, 2003: 177). This Protestant world of the technologies of the self was vastly different from the modern world of personal expressivity, emotion and subjectivity.

The religious subjectivity of the media is a facet of the ‘expressive revolution’ that had its roots in the student revolts of the 1960s (Parsons, 1963). In the new individualism, people invent their own religious ideas, giving rise to the new spirituality. The result has been a social revolution flowing from both consumerism and individualism. Religious lifestyles are modelled on consumerism, in which individuals can try out religions rather like they try out new fashions as in any leisure activity. New industries have emerged offering everything from spiritual advice to pilgrimage packages, religious holidays and dating agencies. Globalization thus involves the spread of personal spirituality, which typically provides not only practical guidance in the everyday world, but also subjective, personalized meaning. Such religious phenomena are often combined with therapeutic or healing services, or the promise of personal enhancement through meditation. Spirituality appears to be closely associated with middle-class singles who are thoroughly engaged with Western consumer values, and who experience no contradiction between personal piety and consumer capitalism. Whereas the traditionally religious find meaning in existing mainstream denominational Christianity, spiritual people, according to Courtney Bender, ‘build and create their own religions in a spiritual market place, intentionally eschewing commitments to traditional religious communities, identities, and theologies’ (2003: 69). The new religious movements are closely associated also with themes of therapy, peace, wealth and self-help. Of course the idea that religion, especially in the West, has become privatized is hardly new (Luckmann, 1967). However, these new forms of subjectivity and privatized practice are no longer confined to Protestantism or the American middle classes; they now have global implications.

Where authority has been devolved, there has been some degree of hybridization of religious traditions. This hybridity is reinforced through globalization and through the processes of borrowing from different religious traditions in a global religious market. To quote once more from Bender’s *Heaven’s Kitchen*, here is her description of ‘Anita’, an informant from the kitchen (known as ‘God’s Love We Deliver’):

[Anita] attended the Sunday morning services at the Episcopalian and Catholic churches on her block. She spirit channelled, took astrology courses, read Deepak Chopra, and dabbled in Catholic mysticism. She grew up in a Jewish family, but since childhood she had been attracted to the ‘mysterious’ black habits that Catholic nuns wore. She recently learned that she had been ‘a nun in a past life’. Anita emphatically told me that her inner spirit guided her to ideas that would be ‘helpful’. (2003: 72)
In summary, the globalization of religion takes three forms (Cox, 2003). There is a global revivalism that often retains some notion of and commitment to institutionalized religion (whether it is a church, a mosque, a temple or a monastery) and an emphasis on orthodox beliefs that are imposed authoritatively. Within this revivalism, there are conventional forms of fundamentalism, but also there are the Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Second, there is the continuity of various forms of popular or traditional religion, which is practised predominantly by the poorly educated who seek healing, comfort and riches from such traditional religious practices. Finally, there is also the spread of new spiritualities that are heterodox, urban, commercialized forms of religiosity that typically exist outside the conventional churches. These two types of popular religion – charismatic movements and spirituality – both involve a departure from the ineffability of past religious forms of communication. In particular, we can regard the development of spirituality as the growth of what I will call ‘low-intensity religiosity’ because, in catering to the individual need for meaning, these post-institutional forms of religion do not necessarily put high demands on the individual. These privatized forms of religious activity do not contribute to the vitality of civil society and simply provide subjective maintenance to the individual. The growth of a consumer society has therefore had a significant impact on religion in terms of the relationship between consumer goods and gods:

Capitalism’s success eroded class rivalries and replaced the activist and utopian mass politics of the inter-war era with a more bloodless politics of consumption and management. Goods not gods were what people wanted. (Mazower, 1998: 306)

However, the long march towards popular, horizontal effable religion is not a smooth, unchallenged evolutionary development. There are, needless to say, significant theological criticisms of the subjectivism of modern religious belief and practice. We can perhaps interpret Karl Barth’s monumental, 13-volume *Church Dogmatics* (1956–69) as a Protestant attempt to block off the slide towards theological liberalism and to assert the otherness and heteronomy of God’s Word and Revelation against subjectivism and anthropomorphism. In his understanding of the human subject as an object posited by God, Barth came to construct a hierarchical system of religious communication in which there is, first, the inner world of the Trinity, God’s relationship with humanity through Christ, the relationship of Jesus to humanity and finally humanity’s own communication. Although this hierarchy does not deny human autonomy, it affirms emphatically the priority of God’s acts of Revelation (Macken, 1990). God’s Revelation in this way never becomes the possession of human beings. In the dialectic between veiling and unveiling, God decides where and when the veil becomes transparent and God is revealed (McCormack, 1995). We might say that Barth’s theology attempted to draw a line between what is properly effable and what is not in order to temper the tendency of Protestant theology – from the popular
sermons and addresses of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1996), especially ‘Addresses on Religion to its Cultured Despisers’, onwards – to assume a romantic and emotional hue (Mackintosh, 1937). The growing strength of subjectivity in modern spirituality suggests that Barth’s attempt to close down that avenue has failed at the popular level. Modern religion is communicative, audible and effable, and above all it is grounded in how individuals feel about the world. In this respect, ‘the triumph of the therapeutic’ (Rieff, 1966) has played an important role in these cultural changes.

Conclusion: Intellectual Reactions to Low-intensity Religiosity

One leading representative of cultural criticism in recent years has been the late Philip Rieff (2006) in his notion of three cultures – first, second and third – and the idea of deathworks. By the concept of deathworks, Rieff points to artworks and other phenomena that stand at the juncture of two cultures where one of them is collapsing. A deathwork is a destructive and deconstructive work that signals and contributes to the collapse of a culture. Rieff believes that we are standing at the collapse of the second culture and the arrival of a third culture. The third culture is post-sacred, post-literate and post-communal. The deathworks are represented by Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Piero Manzoni, Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. The first and second worlds were sacred spaces, characterized by a high literature and a priestly class. For Rieff, the modern world still has a priestly class – sociologists, welfare workers, psychoanalysts and so forth – but it no longer has a sacred space or a literature.

Rieff recognizes that the democratization of culture in the Third World involves a celebration of illiteracy – ‘The democratization of deathworks is seen in the rise of armies of principled illiterates’ (Rieff, 2006: 92). However, the implication of Rieff’s nostalgic critique is that no social order can survive without some notion of the sacred as a foundation for a shared sense of what constitutes authority. His condemnation of Andres Serrano is possible the clearest statement in his work of this issue. Serrano’s Piss Christ of 1987 is seen as a direct and pathetic assault on the sacred that seeks to rob identity of its underpinnings in the sacred. In this sense, Serrano is the archetypical artist of the deathwork.

Rieff’s critique of modern culture in many respects parallels my analysis of religion in the age of information. We might say, in a Rieffian framework, that Madonna’s ‘Like a Prayer’ in 1989 is a deathwork in which Catholicism as an authoritative and meaningful system is collapsing under the weight of the democratizing feminist message of the video.

The rise of low-intensity religion can be regarded as a deathwork signalling the end of authentic and viable forms of personal piety. The principal difference between my account of religion and that which we find in Rieff is that popular religion is not an invention of modern society, but a more or less permanent feature of religious history as such. My principal claim – that is, if you like, a Rieffian argument – is that in modern societies...
popular religion becomes the dominant not the subordinate dimension of
religion as manifest in the growth of popular religion from Pentecostalism
(Martin, 2002) to evangelical broadcasting in Latin America (Vasquez and
Marquardt, 2003) to the circulation of popular versions of Tibetan Buddhism
in the United States.

In a famous article on ‘religious evolution’ in the American Socio-
logical Review in 1964, Robert Bellah developed an influential model of
religious change from primitive, archaic, historic, early modern to modern
religion. The principal characteristics of religion in modern society are its
individualism, the decline in the authority of traditional institutions (church
and priesthood) and awareness that religious symbols are constructs.
Bellah’s predictions about modernity have been clearly fulfilled in the
growth of popular, de-institutionalized, commercialized and largely post-
Christian religions.

In a differentiated global religious market, these segments of the
religious market compete with each other and overlap. The new spirituality
is genuinely a consumerist religion. While fundamentalism appears to
challenge consumer (Western) values, it is in fact itself selling a lifestyle
based on special diets, alternative education, health regimes and mentali-
ties. All three have a degree of consumerism, but they are also distinctively
different. And gender is a crucial feature of the new consumerist religios-
ity where women increasingly dominate the new spiritualities. Women will
be and to some extent already are the ‘taste leaders’ in the emergent global
spiritual marketplace.

While globalization theory tends to emphasize the triumph of modern
fundamentalism (as a critique of traditional and popular religiosity), perhaps
the real effect of globalization is the triumph of heterodox, commercial,
hybrid popular religion over orthodox, authoritative, professional versions
of the spiritual life. Their ideological effects cannot be controlled by
religious authorities, and they have a greater impact than official messages.
In Weber’s terms, it is the triumph of mass over virtuoso religiosity.

The triumph of popular democratizing global culture is now having a
deep impact on traditional hierarchical, masculine religions of the past.
Turning finally to the title of this article, we can generalize by saying that
in traditional society the dominant value emphasized the sacred: not goods,
but gods. In early modernity with the rise of consumerism the monopoly of
orthodox Christianity is broken. We could summarize this by saying that the
gods of consumerism competed with a traditional notion of divinity: not only
God but gods. In late modernity, there is an even more profound commod-
ification of religion resulting in a new principle: gods can also be goods.
The message of the gods becomes effable in the immanence of consumer
goods that carry a message of immediate fulfilment in this world.

References
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**Bryan Turner** is a professor of sociology in the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore. In 2008 he published the third edition of *The Body and Society* with SAGE and the *New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. He is currently editing the *New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. 