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# Linda Woodhead on the New Sociology of Religion

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**David Edmonds:** *Religion is in decline. Modernity is bound to be accompanied with a rise of secularism. So the task of sociology is to chart that inevitable process. Right? 'Wrong', says Linda Woodhead. 'All wrong. That was the old sociology of religion.'*

**Nigel Warburton:** *Linda Woodhead, welcome to Social Science Bites.*

**Linda Woodhead:** Lovely to be here.

**NW:** *The topic we're going to focus on is the new sociology of religion. Now, what has the sociology of religion been traditionally?*

**LW:** It has been very much focussed on secularisation, I mean, so much so you could call it the sociology of secularisation. And that goes right back to Durkheim and Marx and Weber. There's been that huge interest in the decline of religion, until quite recently.

**NW:** *So that's a trend that has been going on observed at least since the 19th century. What's the new sociology of religion then?*

**LW:** Well, it's not concerned only with decline and trying to explain decline. And it has very largely cut itself loose from the prediction that where you have modernising societies you're always going to see the decline of religion. So that grand theoretical underpinning – that is there in a lot of sociology and social science actually – is very much up for grabs, and the sociology of religion is quite pioneering in saying: 'Well, what does sociology look like if we don't assume that modernising societies become secular?'

**NW:** *So, in a way, you're saying that Durkheim and Marx were begging the question about religion?*

**LW:** They were, in their own societies, seeing what was happening and imagining that Europe was the leading edge of social change, and where Europe went, everywhere else would follow. And that hasn't happened.

**NW:** *That's interesting. So they were generalising from too small a section – as it were – of the potential sample size?*

**LW:** Well, yes. They saw with their own horizons. We have bigger horizons and – again – this is all also about how you globalise social science and don't take Europe, or the West, as your main frame of reference.

**NW:** *Now, I can imagine, as you broaden out, the numbers of religions multiply and the complexity of understanding what is going on within those religions increases.*

**LW:** All those things are true and there's another level of complexity on top because the new sociology of religion is also very aware that social differentiation whereby a function like religion is privatised – separated neatly off from education, and law, and culture, and entertainment and so on – that we're seeing a complete de-differentiation as well. So you also need to have a theory of social complexity to try and understand where religion is in a society and what's happening to it. People often imagine that religion is still a completely separate function. So, if you're a sociologist of religion, you have this completely unique sphere of society that you deal with – churches and mosques and... – that's what religion is and it's absolutely bounded. Well, religion isn't like that. So de-differentiation is where you get neat boundaries between different social spheres – like education, law, entertainment – they get blurred and fuzzy. And, of course, they were a characteristic of

the age of the great sociologists; that was the time when societies were differentiating. But now we're seeing the opposite process, and that affects religion as well as other spheres.

**NW:** *You mentioned that the old sociology of religion was tracking a progress towards greater secularisation and a move away from religion, and that was the assumption, that was the model that they were using. What sort of evidence do you have that that was wrong, that we're in an age when we're moving to a growth in religion?*

**LW:** Well, I wouldn't want to say let's replace the old paradigm of decline with a new paradigm of growth. I think it is about replacing it with an understanding of the social worlds as just much, much more complex. So, since some societies, some sorts of religions may be declining, some sorts may be growing. In other societies, there may be a very different picture. So there's not one grand theory that's going to explain the world any more. That's the difference.

**NW:** *I know you've done research on religion in Britain and the kinds of beliefs and values that people have. Can you just tell us a bit about that?*

**LW:** Well, Britain's interesting in relation to the new sociology. It's not one of the countries around the world where religion is expanding hugely, becoming in some ways more dominant than the old political sphere was. I mean, you can see that in some parts of Africa for example. But in Britain, we are one of the more secular countries in the world still, but nevertheless there's this huge change been going on since the late '80s. So, the historic religions like the Roman Catholic Church or the Church of England – which is still the established state church – have been in very rapid decline in terms of attendance, in terms of the number of people who call themselves Catholic or Anglican – all those things are declining. And yet, that's not the only picture. So in some ways, they remain very central in life. For example, they run schools, and there's a huge demand for faith schools. I have looked a lot at the growth of alternative forms of spirituality. We did a famous research project in 2000-2002, taking the town of Kendal in Northern England, called the Kendal Project. We looked there just at what was happening; we took that town as a kind of spiritual laboratory, and we looked at how the churches were declining, but we found to our astonishment, even in 2000, this huge proliferation of alternative forms of spirituality: of mind, body, spirit care. We found 126 different practitioners in this one small town. And, since then, those sorts of things have continued to grow, and, of course, we've become more multi-faith.

**NW:** *I can imagine that's quite hard to define, this notion of spirituality. For instance, I'm a philosopher, my books sometimes crop up in the 'Mind, Body, and Spirit' section of bookshops and I'm slightly miffed at that.*

**LW:** You're quite right because there is a spectrum from those that focus on the *spirit* through to those that are purely *bodily*. You know, you can have yoga classes which are just about your bad back and you can have some where there is a very strong spiritual teaching element. So, the way we did it in the project was to ask the person who was facilitating or leading the group if they would understand their practice and what they offer people as spiritual, and then we eliminated – it was about half actually - about half said 'no' and half said 'yes', and so we only counted the ones who said 'yes'. People have tried, sociologists have tried, to define 'religion' for ever. There will never be any agreement because it's a complex phenomenon. But, basically, it's a label for a whole range of complex patterns of beliefs, groups, values, symbols – in different combinations. And there's always an argument, it's always contested, whether something can be labelled as religious or not.

**NW:** *So, you zoomed in on Kendal. Now there's an interesting question about how you can generalise from that case or whether you want to generalise. Is that just a study on one particular town, or is it something which is supposed to reveal more about what's going on in Britain?*

**LW:** Well, that was just a locality study. Obviously you have to start somewhere, and I have done subsequently quite a lot of cross-sectional national surveys to test out whether what we've found in Kendal can be found elsewhere. But that research, obviously, helped me to see what I was looking for, what I wanted to ask, and how to formulate survey questions appropriately.

**NW:** *Well, you've mentioned survey questions. Is that the principal method: that you go about asking people about their religion?*

**LW:** No, it's one method. It would never be my primary method because survey questions on religion have, they've been really quite retrograde because they're tied into the old sociology of religion. So they only ask about *do you still go to church?* So they were missing out kind of 80 percent of the interesting questions of where people had gone on. It's rather like saying *well, people don't use the telephone as much these days, so they're not communicating.* So, I think you always have to keep your feet really firmly on the ground in really good quality of research and participant observation so that you can then test what you're finding with surveys. But if you just start with surveys and never go out of your office, you're always going to end up asking the wrong questions.

**NW:** *Does that mean you actually went out there in Kendal and attended religious services?*

**LW:** Oh yes. We had a team of five of us and we spent two years completely immersed in living and looking at absolutely everything and spending time with the groups and interviewing them and going to all the different services, and so on. And I do that all the time round the world: that's my job, that's what I love doing. I go and nose about in everything that's happening.

**NW:** *Does that mean you stand out as somebody taking notes and watching them, or do you go undercover?*

**LW:** Both, really. I mean, not undercover, but I just go around as a normal tourist. I mean, religion is a public phenomenon, luckily, so you don't need permission to go into a church or whatever it might be. The other lovely thing about being a sociologist of religion is people love talking about religion, it's never a problem; people want to tell you what they believe. So, I go and I chat to people, and, yes, sometimes a line between a chat and this research can be thin, but if I cross this people then I will say to people 'well, this is really fascinating, would you mind if I did this as an interview?' and then go through the ethical protocols that you'd need then.

**NW:** *When you're doing this research are you, more or less, like a social anthropologist? Are you trying to make sense of something which is potentially quite foreign to you?*

**LW:** Sometimes, I am. If I'm going to another country, I mean, for example, I was in Israel recently and I was very interested in talking to the ultra-orthodox who are quite separate and I stumbled upon a way of doing that. So, I had a friend with me who could translate and we just went shopping; and shopping is a really wonderful zone because it's kind of public/private, and the Haredi – the ultra-orthodox – have their own shops and they were quite happy for you to be in the shop because you're a potential customer and, of course, we bought things. And then you get talking, and then, when we got on well, we just sat ourselves down in the shop and then you can talk to the customers that come in. I don't know if it's public or private. I call it 'shopping-based research' and it works really well.

**NW:** *Has anything actually surprised you in your research? Something that you'd never expected to find?*

**LW:** Oh, I'm surprised all the time. I mean, for example, I was in the Philippines looking at Catholic Church last year and I thought the Mass would be absolutely full because it's 81 percent Catholic. There was no one in the

Mass until the very, very end and everyone rushes in off the street, of all ages, to have the holy water sprinkled on them. So, that surprised me.

My survey results in the UK surprise me all the time. Some little simple facts like 0 percent of Catholics say that they take the Pope as an authority, when they live their lives – that surprised me - even churchgoing ones is at about 1 percent. My survey research often surprises me with much bigger findings than that, for example: in this country, if you look at people's values – so what they think about, say, abortion or same sex marriage: there are no predictive factors. It doesn't matter about their gender; it doesn't matter about their political voting. It matters a little bit about age, with relation to same-sex marriage. Actually, Anglicans are more in favour of liberalising the law than the general population; Catholics almost as much so. Seventy-two percent of Anglicans would like the law to be liberalised, but the general population is about 70. But the biggest predictor by far of all of those is whether they believe in God with certainty or not. If they believe in God with absolute certainty and take their authority mainly from religious sources, then they're conservative about same-sex marriage, about euthanasia, about abortion.

**NW:** *Is it fair then to say from our discussion so far that the new sociology has revealed that any discussion of religion has to be more nuanced than it has traditionally been?*

**LW:** Yes, very much so. The old sociology of religion thought either you're religion or you're secular: it's a kind of zero-sum game. We can see now, that's just not the case. If you look at Britain, it's not a secular country in any sense: its institutions, it's got an established church, but even its population. About two thirds of people in Britain will say they are religious, or spiritual, or believe in God. About a third would say then they have no religion or are secular. So, in no sense is it straightforwardly religious, but not only is religious in the same way, or to same degree. I never ask 'Do you believe in God? – Yes/No?' I always have it as a scaled question: 'certainly/probably/on Mondays but not...' (Laughs). All of these questions are more complex than we used to think.

**NW:** *The new sociology of religion is clearly within the social sciences. Now, as a social scientist, are you doing something that is akin to a hard scientist, as it were: you're doing empirical research with some degree of objectivity that can be replicated in different circumstances. Or is it different than that?*

**LW:** I don't think it's different from the sociology of any other aspect of society. Well, I wouldn't be a positivist about it; there aren't clear objective facts out there that are just waiting to tell us what they are. We come with a frame of reference. The new sociology is this side of the cultural turn, so it's not just looking at observable behaviours; it's also interested in culture, and beliefs, and symbols, and material cultures in that way, but no different than any other sociology of other fields.

**NW:** *I know you're dealing with surveys and, potentially, statistical results. But the subject that you're dealing with has got more fluid borders, as we've discussed, so is it hard to make predictions on the basis of the kind of evidence that you've got about what's actually happening in Britain and elsewhere at the moment?*

**LW:** I do feel, as social scientists, we do need to make predictions to be relevant, and we do have a better basis for making them than the media, or politicians, or others who will make them in our absence if we don't try and help. But we have to have a different basis on which we make predictions from the natural scientists, because, of course, human being are not predictable natural phenomena and are reflective and change partly in response to research and events. So, we have to think about the complexity of social events, and the many, many factors that are involved in them, including a religion, and then perhaps say 'well these are path-dependent, so it's quite likely that things will go in this way but if this is different, they could go in this way.' So a more complex approach to prediction making but not trying to duck it all together.

**NW:** *One last question. Are you, yourself, religious?*

**LW:** Yes, I'm born an Anglican; I'm brought up an Anglican; I would call still myself an Anglican. It's actually very hard to maintain your faith, kind of, existentially, when you're studying it. It's a different kind of mentality when you're sitting there; I've always got my mental notebook out – so, ask me that question when I've retired and I'll tell you what happens then.

**NW:** *Linda Woodhead, thank you very much.*

**LW:** My pleasure.