

Religion, Neoliberalism, and Consumer Culture

Podcast with **François Gauthier** (7 October 2013).

Interviewed by **Hanna Lehtinen**.

Transcribed by **Martin Lepage**.

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Hanna Lehtinen: We are here in Turku ISSR conference, and I am here with Francois Gauthier, who is Professor of Sociology of Religion in Fribourg. My French is awful, but this is in Switzerland. Previously he has been based in Quebec in Montreal, and he's been doing empirical research on subculture, countercultural phenomenon, and today we are talking especially about religion and consumer culture, consumer society and neoliberalism. Welcome.

François Gauthier: Thank you very much for having me. Yes, so basically the economic question came up because I was doing studies on those phenomena, and also on new political phenomena. Protests happening in the mid 90's that led to the anti-globalization movement, and up to today's Occupy movement. What I saw is that subcultures self-defined against consumerism, and political movements, new political movements had changed radically since the 70s. In the 70s, it was all about taking power... Maoist guerrilla types of terrorist action, whether it be in Quebec or in Germany or elsewhere, and it was linked with the Arab struggle and stuff like that, the anti-imperialist movement. Starting with the 90s, well, we have these subcultures that are very festive. All the sudden, political protest becomes festive. What's that? Instead of having a confrontation with power, it was "Let's open areas of autonomy," with respect with the State. In a way, it was not about confronting the State, but it was more calling the State back to its public, what [Grace Davie](#) would call "public utility". It was saying, well the State, you have to regulate markets. Basically, what I already intuitively knew, what that the world was governed by a new force that was not

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political, but was economic. So I started, first of all, challenging political theory, and challenging religious theory, from the margins, saying that theory available today did not allow us to understand these phenomena. Ravers say this is spiritual. This can't be dealt with [available] theory. What's wrong with the theory? While most people were doing the contrary, they were saying "This is not religion". They say it is, but it's not. But it's massive, and it still happens today. If ravers say they're religious, it doesn't matter, it doesn't fit our definition. I took the contrary way in saying that the problem is the definition. The problem is not the ravers. And if the ravers feel that Catholicism and raves are on the same level, then they are. (5:00) It's the sociologist that has the problem, not the ravers. That was a starting point, and the same thing with the political theory side. So basically, it was the realisation that a major factor in understanding these phenomena was understanding that we were no longer under a sort of political model, a Nation-State regulating political model, but that there was a new regulation, a new world that was emerging, that was essentially governed by economics. And that therefore there were, and there are, religious dimensions to economics, and political dimensions to economics. So how do we understand that? As of the last... these last fifteen years have been the development of that initial intuition...

HL: So, basically a new power's come into play or has kind of strengthened, and what happened is that the scholars of religion still look at it kind of from the [Westphalian Nation-State](#) point of view. And these new arenas that these religions are taking up do not fit the categories that the State has kind of institutionalised for religion. And this is what we have a problem with, scholars of religion.

FG: Exactly. Exactly. Yes. Just a kind of liminal methodological word. I'm French, and I'm from French theory where [Durkheim](#) and Marcel Mauss are still quite important. Actually, Marcel Mauss has become to be important anew. And Marcel Mauss refused to separate sociology and anthropology. He was one of the founders of French sociology, and the French sociologists were the first to, and the only ones to, use sociology as a word, because Weber self-identified as an

economist, so when you are talking about sociology, this is what you're talking about. And this founder of French sociology basically his discourse meant, what he meant by we need not separate, we must not separate sociology and anthropology, is because sociology is concerned with societies, which itself defines as being something like modern societies, bureaucratic societies, with differentiated social spheres. And so it implicitly says that, with respect to every other culture in the world that's ever been and today the West, there is sort of a great shift. So it postulates a uniqueness. This is the basis for many secularisation theories and many evolutionist theories. Mauss was very aware that this was dangerous. There is a specificity to modern societies, Western societies, and now web societies worldwide, but there are certainly not in complete discontinuity with other so-called archaic societies or societies that existed before. On the other side, anthropologists who study the Other, the archaic so-called primitive societies, the simple societies. You have two normative trends in anthropologists. Either you discredit the primitive societies as being infants that will eventually grow into adults. Or on the contrary you idealize the Natives by saying "This is great, everything is meaningful and peaceful, and now we've gone into these modern societies'. And so you have a disenchantment narrative. If you keep both modern societies together with so-called primitive or archaic societies, and you're always thinking "How do I differentiate what I'm looking at, with respect to the first societies?", and "Where do I find continuity?" As a point of method, I think this brings a lot of fresh water. It avoids of seeing too much continuity, and the same time it avoids seeing too much difference. So I always read contemporary phenomena while thinking 'How does this relate to Siberian shamanism in the early 1900s?', "How does this relate to (10:00) Brazilian Amazonian forest Yanomamis?", and, even if I'm looking at contemporary Judaism or whatever, I do this. And I tell my students to do this. And I tell them "Put the book, put Malinowski on your table, and once in a while, after you go to the toilet or have a coffee, just open any page and read it. And then close it". Just to keep that in mind. So that sort of also sketches my approach to contemporary societies.

With the issue of consumerism or economics within culturally regulated system, the two books that we just published with Thomas Martikained, [Religion in the Neoliberal Age](#) and [Religion in Consumer Society](#). These are two books, but actually they're one book. On the one hand, this has not been done before, not at all, even in economics or in sociology, is to think neoliberalism, not only as a dominant political ideology, or an economic theory, but also as a cultural ideology, and asking why did this theory that looked completely crazy in the 1940s, and was almost totally dismissed, has no... promises no utopia, has no [positive] value to it at all, has become so self-evident today and dominant. At the same time, consumption... the age that you have, and the age that I have... we grew up in this. This is obviously one of the major traits of societies today. But you will not find this to be opening statements in books on work, family, religion, law. So this is what we started the book saying, for book one, saying "We live in a neoliberal era", and the other book, by saying "We live in consumerist societies". These are not the only traits, but these are very, very important defining traits of our societies today. How did this grow up? How did this occur? In the post-Second World War period, which was a rapid growth period after the Second World War, for about three decades, this is when Nation-State really developed into a welfare state. And what happened also in the economic level at the same time is that production, since the crash of 1929, could no longer pull the economy. That was one of the reasons behind the crisis. Marketing was invented, meaning "We need to create needs, and we need to create consumption, and then production will follow." So when Max Weber is writing in the early 1900s about economy, he's writing about a productive industrial economy. But that only applies in part today, because since at least the 1950s and 1960s, we're living in post-industrial society in which it is no longer production that is pulling the economy, but consumption. And this type of society emerged slowly during the 1960s and 1970s, and really started to be dominant within people's lives in the 1980s. The 1968 riots in California, May '68 in France... if you look at what is claimed, it was not as much of a political revolution as a cultural revolution, and the values of liberty and autonomy, those are also those of consumer capitalism. This was instilling itself. One of the theories, one of the hypotheses we have, is by the time Deng Xiaoping in

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China, deregulates the inner market, by the time that Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan come in and start applying free market policies, it's not just a question of "Okay, there were four crises in 1973, and 78". It's not just because of the inflation and all that. It became widely popular as a way of governing societies, because people had become accustomed over thirty years of having an economic rapport to life. (15:00) That you can buy services, you can buy vacations, you can buy all these things. Even from the 1950s in the United States, what marketers have found out is that the economy does not function according to laws of... the laws of offer and demand. It has nothing to do with it, or very little in the end. What is driving is that it is no longer what the washing machine can functionally do, because there are seventeen or eighteen other brands that are doing exactly the same thing. It's in the name of the things marketers, which... can't remember his name right now... it's what the washing machine will do for your soul. It's not what car you will drive, it's what this projects, how does this project or express who you are? Cigarette brands... Malboro was a woman's cigarette until I think the 1940s. Then all the sudden they rebranded it, with the Malboro man and that become of the most successful brand name operation in the world. It has nothing to do with the product. It's the fact that when you're smoking Malboro's, and today they rebranded it with more of a hipster content, you're buying an identity. You're not buying identity in a commodification way, you're really, you're buying signs, that you're putting out towards the world saying who you are. If consumerism worked, it's because of that. And because we're modern individualistic societies, and what individualism is about is that you are unique. You are different than anybody else in the world. This is a radically new way to see, to conceive humanity, and to conceive subjectivity. It's radically new. But how are you going to do that? In the 1900s, there was a romantic movement, in the elite aristocratic and literary elite could function within that ethos, but with consumer society, starting with the 1950s and 1960s, it got massified, then it meant that anybody could create his own self, in a way. Or at least, participate in certain identities and certain lifestyles, because people are good enough with their own liberty that they can really create their own look. You can only buy the clothes that are in the shops. Consumerism is all about choice, but, right now, if

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you want baggy jeans, you going to be looking for a long time for baggy jeans, better go to second hand stores, cause everything that is available is tight jeans. You see that it's a choice, that's always at the same time determined by what's out there, and somebody determined this stuff.

So what we were basically saying is that you cannot separate neoliberalism and consumerism, because they work together, and you can't understand the rise of neoliberalism if you don't understand that it's rooted also in the conditioning that being consumers, as the condition that's happened within the social... and then we talked of other phenomena. The fact that we used to talk about governmentality in politics which meant authority, hierarchical structures, and taking political decisions and values into actions. Today, we talk of governance. Try not to use the word governance, which is more of a market model, horizontal, procedural, consensual way of functioning politically. That has come into the fore. And nobody today in political science writes governmentality, everybody writes governance. There is an ideology behind that, there is a shift, a huge shift in [imagining...]. And then take management, which today, universities, the economics and marketing schools in our university are by far the most populated, the most popular. They didn't exist at the end of late 1970s. There was not marketer before 1995, I think, that was actually trained as a marketer. And today, it's the very heart of our universities. We have to realize this, and this goes into, if you're taught management, and massive parts of that, massive amounts of our contemporaries (20:00) are being trained in management, it makes you think in a management way. And this is why all the sudden you're managing your stress, you're managing your love life, you're managing absolutely everything within your life and this in an economic way of viewing things. So what we're trying to do with these books is say "You cannot understand what's going on if you don't link all this up. You can't look at just public policies, and neoliberalism as a doctrine. You cannot look at it only philosophically." It doesn't help. It's much more profound and anthropological, and it relates on every level going from high level policies at the UN, how this is implemented in how the world bank functions and all that. And in the very and most privatized aspect of everyday

life, and how people choose how to dress every day, and how they decide on their consumption choices, because even the type of coffee you drink is a way of showing who you are.

HL: So, because obviously what we were saying earlier about the mix and match approach, which I've come across a lot, a lot of people talk about how religion, as you say, your choices are not, and they mean something, always, and they construct you as you are, and that's why you have to put off weight on it, basically. Then religion is no exception. This has been noted by many scholars, that it is a big identity thing, as well as this kind of spiritual... you can choose, say you can do yoga, you can go to some nice Christian retreat, you can do all these things and that kind of also constructs your identity. But so, you're saying that there is no mix and match. Could you elaborate on that?

FG: Absolutely, your question is excellent and it comes perfectly in mind with what I was saying before. Religion is not a thing, it is related to different contexts, different societies and different cultures. Shamans... shamanistic cultures in Siberia, I mean there are no spirits, there is no belief, there is no scripture, no god. There is just "how do we manage to kill elk?" It's much more complicated than that, but it's just to kind of open our mind to what religion is. With that consumerist shift, what's happened is that religion has changed, but we're so used to thinking of religion as being the church, or something that is separated within social sphere. The church is a certain place, there [are] certain people who take care of that, and there are certain times where you go. And it also relates to either a local level belonging and identity, and then national level of identity. We are so used to that that we think this is normal. But if you go back to a country like Quebec in the early 1800s, it was not like that. Catholicism wasn't even important, that became important in the mid-1900s. So if it changed before, why can't it change radically now?

HL: Exactly

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FG: And so, if you get that perspective, you stop having to think about religion disappearing or coming back or whatever. Now, societies have changed and religious change is an important factor in that change. Today, religion has morphed into tribal belongings, lifestyle-type of belongings, mediated namely through the virtual sphere, but also the local level on a person-to-person basis in collectivity. These are overlapping levels. So religion has become less involved about correct belief and belonging to a set community, it's more about ethics. 'How do you live your life?' If I'm a Muslim, I will eat *halal*, and avoid *haram*, and I will wear a veil if I'm a woman, and do this, and the five prayers. This wasn't important in Islam, twenty, thirty, forty years ago. This was not important. This has become important since that economic shift that changes religion towards ethics and identity. (25:00)

So, your question was about the pick and choose. How do you analyze that? Many scholars have talked about this as being [à la carte, people choose their religion, they mix and match](#) this and that, it's sort of light, it doesn't have many incidences, and therefore sort of degraded form of religion. This is sort of what is involved in this kind of thinking. The subtext of this is saying that this type of religiosity is sort of not real religiosity. And the second thing that it is saying is that this is not structured, it's fragmented, it's incoherent, it's amorphous. In the end, it doesn't really make sense. Another line of argument, that sort of touches on to this, has been thinking of religion in economic terms. There is a religious market, and people pick and choose, and there are laws of offer and demand, and all this. The first narrative, the one that says that things are fragmented, and all this, basically, it's trying to think within the same categories of what religion was before, and so what it is seeing it that it looks fragmented, because it's looking with the eyeglasses of what it used to be. We've heard that loads in this conference. It's been a huge debate and it's starting to change. I think that there are new ways emerging, and I think that this conference is probably, in Turku, is probably one of the moments where the discipline is shifting. The other way, the second part that sees rational choice theory and that kind of salvation goods, or looking at the branding of religion, these are interesting insights, but when you look at what they really do, is that

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they completely lose specificity of religion and they treat religion as any other product, being a Mars bar or buying a vacation on Club Med, and nobody has ever asked the question “Is religion really that much of a product?” The basic flaw, and this has perhaps not been said enough, cause there’s been loads of debates on rational choice and even important people, intelligent people, have given rational choice way too much credit in my view. Rational choice must be absolutely avoided at all cost. Why? Because it’s not understanding this new way of religiosity, it’s not understating the relationship between a consumer neoliberal type of society, with respect to religious change. It’s interpreting religious change in economic terms. And it’s doing so saying that, basically, it’s always been the case. Well, I’m sorry. Yanomami religion, Siberian shamanism, 1930s Catholicism in Quebec, or Lutheran Christianity in Finland, did not... was not an economic decision of maximizing utility with the laws of offer and demand. It was not that. So the question is “Why did these theories emerge?” Actually, the theories emerged because we are in a economic driven society. This is the only thing that rational choice theories hint us. They tell us where we should be looking, we should be understanding that we don’t have to think religion in economic terms, we have to see how the society has changed, where economy is being structuring... has become structuring, and religion changes in rapport with this. What we’re proposing is a radical sidestep outside of rational choice.

And if I may pursue the line of argument that was crossing my mind... is that [secularisation theory](#), meaning the decline of religion, the decline of social functions of religion, the privatization of religion within the private life, the separation from the public sphere, religion becoming a differentiated social sphere that basically has relationships with the rest of the social spheres, but that keeps to itself, this kind of thing. And then the debates on “Is religion returning?”. [It went away and now it’s returning](#). Basically these debates have come to criticise secularisation theory in a way that I think, the great majority of sociologists of religion today (30:00) would sort of agree that secularisation doesn’t work anymore to think today. But nothing has emerged yet that can present itself as being the new paradigm. One of the problems is that we’ve

been so scared of general theory, because the general theories we had until Parsons and Luhmann, and that kind of stuff, was basically trying to explain everything from theory. And so, it didn't work with the facts and people rebelled against that. Today, we're on a very contrary, we're on the contrary of the 1960s, where, today, and that's the question we get all the time, is that, "Yes, but what about specific local context?". Well, of course there is a specific local context, but the problem is nobody's thinking the link between the fact that yoga has become a major site of spirituality/religiosity today, in Western countries, and that Islam is totally reshaped by Islamic televangelists all over the world, including the Arab world and Indonesia, and that these televangelists are not religiously trained, they're businessmen types. And Julia Howell was talking about that in the plenary this morning. And this is totally redefining Islam. Nobody connects these dots, and tries to show how this frames. Everybody's looking at all the variegated aspects within national contexts, but nobody's trying to grab that globally and transnationally and showing that, well, if you sidestep and look at things a certain way, all of the sudden, these things seem structured, all of a sudden you start seeing the links Burning Man festival, festivals of the Senegalese Sufis in New York. So, this is what we are attempting to do. We're not saying it applies absolutely everywhere, because it's tied to the logics of globalization, where has the market, and where has the Internet and all that reached. Where Internet, the marketing and consumerism have reached, this is where you will find this type of change in religiosity. And this is not fragmented, this makes a lot of sense, this is very much structured. But then, it expresses itself in different parts of the world in amazing manners that are sometimes quite different, but at the same time sometimes quite similar. For example, these Islamic televangelists in Indonesia hired Texan Pentecostals to help them build their thing. So there's more and more of these transnational movements that are all collaborating to structure religion in this new way.

HL: This is hugely interesting. I'm just listening in awe, I'm not even coming up with anything to say, really. I'm afraid we don't have much time left and we have to close this interview. Pack it up. I have one more question, a question I tend to ask always. And that is what next?

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FG: What next? Today, in Turku 2013 ISSR conference, I would say that what next is to not do once again the same normative and ideological mistake we did with the secularization theory. Secularization theory was bound to a certain type of religion, and to a certain way of seeing religion that was Christian-oriented. This way of looking at things devalued women, it didn't look at what women we're doing, but women were doing stuff, and devalued non-institutional phenomena as being irrelevant. What we're saying today is that women are foremost in religious change, and that the non-institutional stuff is probably the most important today, and the institutions are changing in relationship to the non-institutional. So the secularization paradigm was stuck in modern ideologies, stipulating that religion was going to stay what it was, and therefore decline because there was modernisation equal [non-religion](#). (35:00) There is a whole lot of debate around this. It's an ideological frame that left a lot of stuff out, and what can we do with the "What now?" is "How do we avoid doing that again?" Obviously, any type of paradigm, any type of general theory of understanding the world will leave stuff behind. But you can try not to be too stupid about it, and in my view, one of the major challenges today comes from the idea of [post-secularity](#). Post-secularity is the greatest threat to sociology of religion today. Why? Because it stipulates secularization, says it's an after, first of all. Second, it's it was coined by [Habermas](#), who was a philosopher, and is mostly concerned with a rationalist and public-space bias. This is a philosophical discussion, it's not a sociological description of societies. So it looks sexy, but actually it shouldn't be a sociological concept. And another main thing is that in all of this discussion on post-secularity, at least most of it, the essential core if it... stays within the secularisation in the Nation-State frame, what things used to be, politics and religion being the two self-structuring... the two structuring spheres, and it does forget about economy. It says nothing about the fact that we live in consumer societies. Habermas has absolutely nothing to say about neoliberalism except the Frankfurt critiques of the 1960s. This has never thought of how consumption is different from production, it has not entered their mind, they haven't thought the Internet out, and they've especially forgotten women and culture. So even if you are paying attention to

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economics and culture within this frame of post-secularity, you're still continuing to miss what's happening. I think what the challenges in "what now?", is "Let's try not to be as stupid. Let's try not to be as ideological," and let's go into this very exciting period which is the redefinition of the paradigm through which we're going to study religion. And of course, we think we're right, saying that you must pay attention to the ideologies of neoliberalism, consumerism as an ethos, and the relationship of all this with hypermediatization and real time technologies, which in places like Africa, remote places of Africa, where they don't even have normal telephone lines and electricity, they have cellular phones now. They have one set of pants, one set of shirts, and a cell phone. And so even the places that don't seem like they are relevant to this type of analysis... you can ask the scholars on the field, as I do, as much as I can, and this is relevant. This is very very relevant.

HL: Thank you very much. This has been great.

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