

**A GOD OF ONE'S OWN: RELIGION'S CAPACITY FOR PEACE AND POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE** by Ulrich Beck, translated Rodney Livingstone, *Polity*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. x + 231, £45 hbk

This work marks a radical change of direction in the interests of a prominent and highly productive German sociologist, who divides time between the London School of Economics and the University of Munich. Beck has pursued long-standing interests in cosmopolitan values, globalisation and 'reflexive modernisation', and building on these, he has now found God, or so it would seem. For one who ranks with Bauman, Bourdieu and Giddens, none of whom is sympathetic to religion, this turn to the matters of the Divine cannot but be of interest. Oddly, it would seem that as some vociferous natural scientists are desperate in their decide, sociologists are gazing at the embers of modernity and seeking Him.

Usually, Anglo-American sociology is concerned with the reverential handling of French imports, notably the products of Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan. As these fade in significance, they seem to be replaced by a German triumvirate, of Habermas, Joas and now Beck, who are re-casting radically notions of secularisation in ways that take cognizance of the persistence of religion and its theological ambits, hence the rise of interest in a new term of doubtful pedigree: post-secularity. The term denotes a paradigm shift in sociological theory, very much the outcome of the dialogue between Benedict XVI and Habermas, which commenced in 2004. Reflecting this paradigm shift, Beck wishes to make his contribution to finding a sociological means for deciphering 'the religious signature of the age' (p. 64).

Whilst admirably sectionalised, with a good index and biography, the work is stimulating, but decidedly inchoate and utterly unconvincing. In this case, it is the fact of the effort, what the text symbolises, that is of interest and less its analytical results. Appearing as novel, this study is indicative of another failure of sociological conceit in a long line of effort to displace God with god, one cast according to social exigencies which traditional religion, notably Christianity, is ill fitted to resolve, as Beck claims. This god seems to have a peculiar insecurity of tenure, shifting from nation to the self and now in Beck's version, re-cast as an inner reference point to cater for cosmopolitan imperatives, the sensibilities generated by 'reflexive modernization' and the choices that are the properties of individualization which emerge with the maturation of modernity. Beck's research group, dealing with 'reflexive modernization', provides the creative discussions for this study, which is described as an 'adventurous excursion into the fascinating byways of the volcanic landscapes of religion' (p. ix). The outcome is curious.

Disavowing the notion that he is writing 'a theology of a God of one's own' (p. 10), this caveat does not inhibit Beck from stipulating the nature of his god and how it ought to be constituted. This god should be one emancipated from the clutches of 'ecclesiastical spell... dogmas, liturgies and exegeses', being instead 'a humanized fellow-God who is both individualized and standardized' (p.12). Thus, Beck is not marking the end of religion but rather seeking a means of 'entry into the self-contradictory narrative of "secular religiosity" which it is our task to decode' (p.16). Beck, however, does not seem to have much faith in this venture, given the first line of the study, where he asks 'is it possible to begin a book with a confession of failure?' (p. 1). He is honest in wondering whether it is 'a vain quest' to find an alliance between 'sociology's claims to knowledge and perhaps also of religion's own self-understanding' (p. 2). Reflections on the failure of the book emerge further in a long footnote (pp. 65–66) where he wonders if religions, which are transnational might lapse into nationalistic rhetoric. All the time, Beck is seeking escape from constraints of traditional religions, their capacity to erect boundaries and to sink their identities into nationalism. The universal claims of

world religions generate worries for Beck over their powers to rank unequally. It is this tyranny of hierarchy and superiority that concerns Beck.

The first two chapters are the most fruitful in the study. The first chapter, dealing with the diary of a concentration camp victim who discovers the depths of spiritual being and the second, aptly entitled 'the Return of the Gods', are telling, not least when Beck suggests that 'the collapse of secularization theory is, therefore, of far greater significance than, for example, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc' (p. 21). The flip side of this failure of secularisation generates a worry for Beck over the possible emergence of a new dark age (p. 55). Worries over this prospect cause Beck to refine his understandings of secularisation suggesting that modernity reveals the way that god as a liability can be converted into an asset.

Secularisation as it appears in the first form of modernity is tied into legislation and nationalism and becomes unsustainable. This death of secularity facilitates the rise of a new version of religion, one emerging in the second form of modernity, that builds on individualisation, where a multiplicity of choices so generated provides the basis for seeking a 'God of one's own' (p. 80). This latter possibility finds endorsement with the rise of new religious movements (p. 26)-whose significance Beck exaggerates. Certainly, he is right to suggest that, taken with the emergence of these and the rise of holistic spirituality, the maturation of modernity has undermined the definiteness of secularisation that religion had vanished. His central thesis is that far from diminishing religion, modernisation changes its appearance, rendering it ambiguous, at one remove emancipating, but also laden with dangers (pp. 39–40). This sense of religion uncoupling from its traditional forms of authority generates a situation where individualisation relates to the interior and the cosmopolitan to the exterior. Against this background, Beck seeks to express these changed circumstances in terms of ten core thesis proposition (pp. 85–90). Some strange assertions emerge among these, such as in thesis six that 'Amnesty International may be understood as a modern church dedicated to a God of its own making' (p. 88).

Beck's sociology is mobilised to criticise monotheism and the monopolistic claims to superiority of revelation made by traditional forms of religion, by which he means Christianity. For him, a defence of religion in hybrid form affirms the individual's search for a God within. There is a curious property to the study that in its efforts to affirm tolerance and pluralism, the powers of secularisation are enhanced by the indifference these ambitions sustain. In such circumstances, it is not clear where the incentive for a god of one's own comes from, given that truth is sacrificed to a quest for peace. In the study, the ambit of the social is never reconciled to the individualisation of choice and the fears over the narcissism of holistic spirituality are never adequately confronted. Durkheim lurks unresolved in this study.

By chapter 4, the study becomes inchoate. The section charging Luther with inventing 'a God of one's own' has Weberian overtones, seeming to suggest that Protestantism softens up modernity to give to each individual the right to make his own religion as a hybrid and thus sabotaging the monopolistic claims of Christianity which so greatly unsettle Beck. This section sits uneasily with the one which follows, on heresy, derived from Sebastian Castellio and John Calvin. This provides a basis for a counter pointing section on Locke's approach to tolerance.

An annoying property of the study is that humdrum analyses suddenly yield passages of real richness where Beck indicates the way experience and experimentation shape the self to make its own passage of self-fulfilment, a journeying that enables sin and the after life to be secularised (pp. 128–129). But is this fated? Might it be that a *postmodern religiosity*, which generates 'a need to discover the combination of religious practices and symbols conducive to one's own

wellbeing, one's happiness and one's life?' (p. 136) might also yield worries over end of life? As is often the case, theodicies never intrude in these scenarios, and given that an anarchy of subjectivism prevails, with no qualifications by appeal to truth, might it be that the religion and the god so enthroned within could be more dangerous than the traditional forms they replace?

Worries on this point emerge in chapter 5, where five models, ranging from Habermas to Küng to Gandhi are presented as supplying a basis for civilising global religions. Pure forms of religion and a quest for these are treated as divisive. A curious idea of a commodified god (with no reference to its illusory basis for Feuerbach) emerges, one fit for a marketplace, which is pliable and can be bent to any individual need (pp. 150–154). As implied earlier, the final chapter entitled 'Peace instead of Truth?' is less than persuasive and presents a muffled end to the study. There is perhaps another dimension to 'the irony of unintended consequences', (which forms part of the title of chapter 5) that the unsettlements that generate individualisation might be those that facilitate a return to a reinvented Catholicism, one subtly fitted to the needs of cosmopolitization.

Perhaps it is a sign of the newly cast sociological times that Benedict XVI gets the last word in the study, that reason not force is the highest value for believers. This leads Beck to query whether this deference to reason permits faith to be 'civilised' (p. 200). By this he means religion should be domesticated to the needs of peace, toleration and reconciliation. The uncivilised aspects of religion lie in its claims to possess a monopoly of truth. Reason is the instrument invoked to presage civilised properties fitting for uncovering 'A God of one's own'. But that god legitimised by appeals to the absolute claims of reason can yield outcomes that are deeply uncivilised, facilitated as they are by appeals to civilised values. These difficulties find expression in Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

Beck ends the study, oddly. He asks 'how will the individual religions react to the individualization and cosmopolitization of faith? The answer must be reserved for another book-length poking around in the fog' (p. 200). One hopes that what emerges will be less foggy than this study, which, whatever, its demerits, blurs the divisions between religion and theology in ways that unsettle the sociological imagination which, at present settles for the term post-secularity. The term suggests that religion has returned, or rather, that sociologists have not taken sufficient notice of its persistence. Whether this is good news for theologians, or not, is another matter.

KIERAN FLANAGAN

**BRITISH ROMANTICISM AND THE CATHOLIC QUESTION: RELIGION, HISTORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY 1778–1829** by Michael Tomko, *Palgrave Macmillan*, London, 2011, pp. vii + 224, £50

Michael Tomko uses this book to argue that the 'Catholic question' which plagued British politics at the end of the eighteenth century has been largely elided from our understanding of romantic-era culture, a mistake which he hopes to rectify here. Tomko provides a reading of the romantic writers which shows that the Catholic question fundamentally permeated romantic-era literature, challenging writers to engage with ideas of British national and religious identity. This book claims that the perceived dangers of Catholicism to "Britishness" (even by pro-emancipation writers such as Byron and Shelley), led to attempts to articulate a *via media* between religious enthusiasm and superstition.

The first chapter establishes a dialogue between poetic sources and political speeches and pamphlets. In doing so, this chapter also provides a brief but clear overview of the politics of the Catholic question from the Catholic Relief Act of