Individualized religion and the theory of learning

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ABSTRACT

Individualized or postmodern religion, that prioritizes subjective experience and places ultimate authority with the individual, has increased in prevalence over recent decades. Secularization theory views individualized religion as a secularizing phenomenon, due to its supposed inherent structural instability. It is claimed that religious frameworks that locate authority within the individual cannot inspire commitment, create consensus or cohesion, or motivate evangelization, and are thus rendered unable to transmit their ideas, values and practices over time or to have significant impact on wider culture or society. Such a view assumes that effectively functioning religion requires a top-down, hierarchical organizational structure in which members are passive and obedient recipients of knowledge rather than being its active and dynamic co-creators. This article puts forward an alternative, arguably more plausible, way of theorizing individualized religion. Instead of hierarchical structures, individualized forms of religion tend to adopt unplanned and undirected rhizomatic networks of producer-consumers, which both result from and enable their culture of radical personal autonomy. Instead of transmitting values, ideas and practices down vertical lines, they do so horizontally, for example through the creation of spontaneously generated communities of practice. In this way, it is argued, these forms of religion are in principle at least able to transmit themselves effectively both within and between generations.

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Introduction

Various authors accept that individualization of religion (that is a trend towards prioritization of subjective experience and location of authority with the individual) has increased in prevalence. Yet there is disagreement as to how this phenomenon should be understood, and therefore also about what its consequences will be. This article engages with the view that individualized religion tends to be a secularizing phenomenon because its structural characteristics render it unlikely to engender commitment or transmit itself over time. Because such a view constitutes a claim about the capability of individualized religion to pass on specific kinds of knowledge and behaviour, I address it by examining its underlying theory of learning. I put forward two related arguments. First, I argue that this story of decline due to individualization rests on a theory of learning that assumes the necessity of hierarchy, and that this is an inappropriate model to apply to individualized religion. Second, I argue that individualized religion, its transmission, its ability to inspire commitment, and therefore its potential social significance, are better understood through the application of theories of learning descended from the work of Lev Vygotsky, specifically as spontaneously generated communities of practice.

The case against the functional viability of individualized religion

Arguments that individualized religion is structurally prone to decline are perhaps best exemplified by that of Steve Bruce (2011, 112-119). Bruce acknowledges the existence of 'epistemic individualism' within some forms of religion, but identifies it as a key reason why he expects New Age and other individualistic spiritualities to have difficulties engendering ongoing levels of commitment. Bruce argues that liberal religious frameworks that invest authority in the individual lose their ability to inspire commitment (since there is no power to force 'weaker' members to do what the movement sees as right), or to sustain ongoing consensus and consequently a shared life (there being no 'coerced consensus' from above; Bruce, 2011, 114-116). Moreover, Bruce argues, the ideological commitment to the enlightened self as arbiter of truth that characterizes individualized religion runs counter to the very idea of a unified belief and will thus result in increasing levels of eclecticism that will ultimately diminish cohesion and any impetus to evangelize (Bruce, 2011, 116-118). Thus, a structural tension exists between the individual and the community (Bruce and Voas, 2007, 15; Bruce, 2011, 113), which mitigates against the ability to inspire commitment in adherents or to effect change, and ultimately therefore against the likelihood of significant impact on wider culture or society (Bruce, 2006, 42-44).

The implicit model underlying Bruce's argument is one in which effective self-propagation of a religious community entails the engendering in individuals of what the community sees as correct attitude and behaviour, alongside the transmission to individuals of what the community sees as correct values, practices and beliefs. This is at root an act of teaching. More specifically it is an act of teaching according to a top-down framework.

Traditional approaches to education were based on 'objectivist' theories of learning, which assume that there is a single objective reality that can be correctly modeled and interpreted. Human thought is seen ultimately as a way of objectively representing this reality, which is regarded as independent of and external to the human mind (Vrasidas, 2000). On this kind of view, knowledge transmission (i.e. teaching) is simply a matter of representing this external reality using theoretical models and abstract symbols and mapping this representation onto the learner's mind (Vrasidas, 2000), so eliciting a correct behavioural response from the learner (Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995, 266). The teacher is thus, on this model, above all a top-down transmitter of pre-existing objective knowledge (Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995, 266).

Robert Orsi's account of religious education in the Roman Catholic Church in the mid twentieth century illustrates well how religious education can follow objectivist principles (Orsi, 2005, 73-109). The process of 'formation' he describes includes not only strictly applied instruction of what were understood as correct belief and values, but also inculcation of what were understood by the educators as being the correct behavioural and sensory responses (Orsi, 2005, 76-77). Bruce's account of what is needed in order to sustain a religious community over time assumes this same kind of model. He argues that the movement must 'press the weaker members to do what is right' and 'claim a monopoly of salvational knowledge' (Bruce, 2011, 112-115). Thus, in order to survive, a movement must employ an objective approach to the transmission of its beliefs and values. Because this kind of approach is in structural opposition to the individualistic and relativistic approach to understanding inherent to individualized religions, Bruce argues that such forms are unlikely to survive (Bruce, 2011, 113).

Bruce is in effect arguing, justifiably, that the individualism and relativism characteristic of individualized religion mitigate against effective transmission of values, ideas and behaviour over time according to an objectivist model. However, it does not follow from this that those engaging in individualized religion cannot effectively transmit values, ideas and behaviour at all. It just follows that if they do, they must do so in a different way. To understand how this might occur requires a model more applicable to the specific characteristics of individualized religion, for which we must first examine what these characteristics are.

Elements of a theory of individualized religion

An appropriate starting point is Zygmunt Baumann's definition of the postmodern world view as a dissipation of objectivity, leading to a world without hierarchy, composed of meaning generating agencies whose claims to superiority can only be made in pragmatic terms (Baumann, 1992, 35). This encapsulates neatly the point that once individuals decide for themselves, there ceases to be such a thing as a correct view. As David Lyon argues, this leads to a 'fragmentation of institutional structures and intellectual belief systems', which individuals then seek to restructure in novel and diverse ways (Lyon, 2000, 54). Elsewhere he describes this in terms of the emergence of a 'cultural market-place' where a consumerized attitude to cultural and social life

predominates, identifying New Age spirituality as a prime exemplar of this trend (Lyon, 2000, 75). Lyon's concept of consumerized religion combines two complementary elements. First, individuals choose for themselves what religious elements they engage with. Second, individuals then go on to act as producers, engaging creatively to build and rebuild new structures that they find personally appropriate, meaningful and/or useful. Various authors have utilized concepts of consumer religion, though they vary significantly in the extent to which they allow for the second of these elements - that is the extent to which they see individuals as behaving as producers as well as consumers.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's account of a discourse of spirituality grounded in a specifically capitalist individualistic ideology (Carrette and King, 2005, 20-21, 29, 180) is an example of an account that de-emphasizes the place of productive activity at an individual level. These authors argue that this form of psychological individualism 'over-indulges ideas of an isolated self to the detriment of social interdependence', offering meaningless values that serve only to mask the 'oppressive and abusive mechanisms of global corporate power' (Carrette and King, 2005, 56-58). Carrette and King's account exemplifies what Matt Dawson calls a 'discourse' critique of individualization that positions it squarely in a neoliberal context (Dawson, 2012, 311). This kind of view sees individualization as a false illusion of autonomy, where free choice is valorized but enabled only within a set of socially acceptable and 'responsible' consumer options. While appearing diverse, these in practice confine individuals' field of action, ensuring compliance by 'individualizing failure', and thus ultimately serving the needs of neoliberal capitalism (Dawson, 2012, 311-312). Carrette and King focus on individuals who are confined in such a way and are thus not acting as producers. However, as Dawson suggests, even if individualization as brought about by consumerism and neoliberal social structures generally serves to make behaviour predictable, there is evidence that this is then susceptible to subversion as individuals become increasingly critical of their situation (Dawson, 2012, 311-312).

Dawson goes on to distinguish between concepts of 'disembedded' individualization (which theorize individualization in terms of the disappearing significance of social connections) and those of 'embedded' individualization, which theorize individualization in terms of the privatization of concerns to the level of individual responsibility (Dawson, 2012, 313). While the former represent an illusory atomization of the individual, the latter suggest individuals with a 'reflexive awareness of individual responsibility', which further supports the idea of individualized forms of religion admitting of agency coupled with collective forms of identity and action (see Dawson, 2012, 310, 313-314). This notion is exemplified by François Gauthier et al. (2013), who argue that consumerism brings a 'primacy of authenticity'. This has the power to effect a transformation from compliance to commitment, as individuals are empowered to make their own judgements regarding religious truth (Gauthier et al., 2013, 15). Furthermore, and importantly, these authors caution against a simplistic understanding of markets in terms of supply and demand, suggesting that they are better seen as 'networked and hyper-mediatized arenas of mutual exposure' (Gauthier et al., 2013, 18).

Guy Redden explicitly equates the idea of a spiritual marketplace with a literal marketplace of commercial transactions, arguing that it is the very dynamic of commercial exchange that provides the impetus for circulation and dissemination of practices and ideas, and which thus ultimately also shapes them (Redden, 2005, 234-237, 241). For Redden this helps to explain the relativistic nature of the New Age (as an operating principle of the market) as well as its unboundedness (as stimulated by a business interest in creating new product) and its emphasis on therapy (as a kind of marketing hook) (Redden, 2005, 241-242). Redden is clear that the commercial market has not caused the New Age's emphasis on relativistic individualism, that he does not see the New Age as only a market and nothing else, and that to view the New Age in this way is not at all to imply that New Agers are frivolous, gullible or inauthentic (Redden, 2005, 243-244). However he does claim that the market provides a commercialized space which allows individuals to freely choose their own path, and that it thus further feeds the individualistic nature of the New Age (Redden, 2005, 241-242).

Marion Bowman notes a tendency among some authors to use terms like 'spiritual supermarket' and 'pick and mix' to describe the New Age in a derogatory fashion, arguing that these characteristics of the New Age should instead be viewed neutrally (Bowman, 1999, 182). Focusing on holistic healing, Bowman notes the availability of a wide range of courses and books aimed at prospective practitioners, a growing emphasis on earned qualifications, and consequently an increasing convergence between professional and personal development (Bowman, 1999, 187-188). Significantly, however, Bowman also points out that the majority of consultants in this context act as cottage industries with minimal profit, thus suggesting that these consultants' motives are primarily spiritual or personal rather than financial (Bowman, 1999, 188). Bowman identifies Glastonbury as a specialized geographical locus of spiritual consumption with a well-developed spiritual service industry, arguing that this does provide a geographical centre for the kind of market discussed by Redden (Bowman, 2013, 218). She further highlights a complex relationship between notions of spiritual value and monetary value ascribed by practitioners to products and services, such that these two notions of value do not necessarily coincide (Bowman, 2013, 207). While Bowman broadly accepts Redden's model, she also points out that many of the spiritual suppliers at Glastonbury donate time and energy for free for various initiatives, that many feel strongly about the importance of 'right livelihood', and that they tend to see their relationship with other suppliers in terms of spiritual co-operation rather than as commercial competition (Bowman, 2013, 220-222). Thus, while the notion of the marketplace does appear to be a useful concept in helping understand Glastonbury, it does not tell the whole story, either about individuals' core motivations and self-identification as New Agers, or about how they react with one another to develop and inform their spiritual journeys. Similarly, Andrew Dawson argues that the New Age's explicit emphasis on the value of the inner self reinforces its 'anti-consumerist credentials', suggesting instead what he calls a 'mystical consumption' that tends to reduce the status of material

wealth to that of an 'optional, although not unwelcome, extra' (Dawson, 2011, 312-313).

Adam Possamaï explores the commodification of culture by New Age, Pagan and other postmodern practitioners though the creation of products, services and printed material, and the consequent consumption of these by spiritual consumers. He argues that such cultural consumption is wide ranging in scope, and crucially that it is ultimately a creative activity, which might involve transformations of meaning within the self or the justification of previously held beliefs (Possamaï, 2002, 197, 201, 214). Later work on 'hyper-real religions' by Possamaï and others further problematizes charges of inauthenticity against religion created from popular culture sources in the absence of top-down authorities (for example see Possamaï, 2012, 17-20).

Summarizing, all these accounts together suggest a spectrum of concepts of individualized religion. At one end of the spectrum, individuals are conceived of as isolated and passive consumers of packaged or commercial products. At the other end, individuals are conceived of as active and productive co-producers. These individuals tend to be embedded in various kinds of networks through which they share and exchange ideas, values, resources, as both material for and product of their own creative activity. The rest of this article focuses on those towards the latter of these two ends of the spectrum, first examining some wider theoretical aspects of this activity and then going on to the specific application of learning theory.

Individualized religion as an embedded productive activity

To some extent the productive character of individualized religion at an individual level can be elucidated by theories of vernacular religion. These emphasize the power of individuals to create and re-create religion in a 'continuous act of individual reinterpretation and negotiation of any number of influential sources', and thus focus on the contextualized study of how individuals live, interpret and express their religion (Primiano, 2012, 383-386). Belief is understood not as assent to closed doctrinal or knowledge frameworks, but in terms of its day-to-day expression by individuals, in their discourse, their actions, and their relationships with others and with the material world (Bowman and Valk, 2012, 5-10). Individuals' religious identities are seen as multiple, shifting, and often negotiated through their cultural expressions of belief (Bowman and Valk, 2012, 16).

Notions of vernacular religion further enrich theorization of individualized religion in a number of ways. First they provide a way of understanding religious belief on a purely personal level through individuals' own actions and narrative performances, using a range of methodological approaches (Primiano, 2012, 388-390), while avoiding the connotations of superficiality, narcissism and commodification that accompany some notions of consumer religion as seen above. Second, they can help in understanding religious change by charting the processes of negotiation at an individual level (see for example Rowbottom, 2012, 99). Third, and perhaps most importantly, theories of vernacular religion problematize the distinction between postmodern forms

of religion and traditional institutional forms. For example, Robert Orsi's account of belief and practice within Roman Catholicism presents a picture that is very much rooted within the Catholic Church, but also surprisingly postmodern in character. It shows how traditional Catholicism is not just a matter of top-down authority, but also a day-to-day lived expression of faith, and a dynamic and ongoing negotiation between these two (Orsi, 2005). This appears strikingly similar, for example, to the negotiation occurring between New Age spiritualities and mainstream culture (both secular and Christian) in Ingvild Saelid Gilhus' examination of public discussions of angels in Norway (Gilhus, 2012, 242). Viewing individualized religion through the lens of vernacular religion thus provides further insight into how individuals perceive and express their religious identity and belief. Especially, the emphasis on multiple contextual influences and methodological separation of identity from affiliation can help us understand the productive nature of individualized religion at an individual level.

However, it is also important to recognize the active, conscious and self-driven character that productive activity in individualized religion can take. Steven Sutcliffe notes that New Age biographies commonly combine a problem solving perspective with suspicion of external sources of authority, arguing that such seekership journeys exemplify an elementary religious form identifiable as 'raw search' (Sutcliffe, 2013, 30, 32). Elsewhere, Sutcliffe argues that seekers make use of collectivity (through association in various groups and networks) and utilize a wide range of available resources, but crucially that they do so while still maintaining their status as self-reflexive individuals (Sutcliffe, 2003, 208-213). While recognizing the diversity of these collective associations, it is still worthwhile to consider what makes them suitable environments to support this kind of seekership activity.

One strand of such a theory might be to envisage individuals embedded in fluid networks, engaged in forms of exchange similar to a gift economy. Marcel Mauss's seminal work *The Gift* explores the complex combinations of obligation and reciprocity that can surround the giving and receiving of gifts, in particular how these can benefit both giver and receiver, and how they can help generate trust and social solidarity (Mauss, 1966, 63-68). David Bollier characterized a gift economy as 'a web of enduring moral and social commitments within a defined community sustained through the giving of gifts…without any assurance of personal return' (Bollier, 2013, 30). The concept has been used in recent times to help explain, for example, spontaneous grassroots projects such as New York's Community Gardens (Bollier, 2013, 16-18), and especially also the open source software development movement (Raymond, 1999, 80-82; Bollier, 2013, 27-30). In his discussion of co-operation between open source software developers, Eric S. Raymond (1999) makes analogy to a 'babbling bazaar of differing agendas and approaches', where the primary mode of exchange is through sharing, and status is afforded not through formal hierarchies but dynamically as a result of good peer reputation (Raymond, 1999, 21, 81 and 85). In this environment, the co-operative task of building something that participants feel matters is a significantly more important driver than monetary transactions or financial gain.

Another strand might be to echo Manuel Castells' argument that networked social movements, rhizomatic, unplanned and undirected, are an increasingly important driver of social change (Castells, 2012, 17). These movements spread like a plant rhizome, producing offshoots of new growth, each of which could independently survive and develop if isolated from the main body (Castells, 2012, 140-145, 147 and 224). For Castells they are increasingly significant as much for their structure and mode of organization as for their stated aims. Their leaderless nature is both a result of and an enabler of their internal culture of radical personal autonomy (Castells, 2012, 224-234). Castells argues that this societal trend is rooted in the shift to postmodernity, but crucially with the addition of an extra dimension of co-operation and creativity (Castells, 2000, 448-459).

The following three cases exemplify how various authors have applied similar kinds of ideas specifically to individualized religious contexts. First, Dominic Corrywright cites Fritjof Capra's notion of the 'web of life' to suggest a paradigm shift in society from hierarchies to networks (Corrywright, 2003, 85). He cites various authors to envisage New Age spiritualities as multiple overlapping and non-hierarchical institutions and practices, such that individuals' psyches are best approached through application of the concept of a web of relationships to create socially embedded 'thick descriptions' (Corrywright, 2003, 80-96). Corrywright thus argues that these networks are informally developed and disseminated, and holistic in nature, with a close relationship existing between individuals and the shifting networks in which they participate (Corrywright, 2003, 86-88).

Second, Susan Willhauck and Jaqulyn Thorpe, arguing emically from a Methodist context, identify and advocate the emergence of a 'web style of leadership' (Willhauck and Thorpe, 2001). This constitutes a perhaps slightly self-conscious combination of the kinds of structures discussed by Corrywright with the continuation of leadership in a church context. The structure they advocate is networked and non-hierarchical, with leadership increasingly shared, and is intended to create a sense of spiritual unity while recognizing and utilizing the autonomy of individual members (Willhauck and Thorpe, 2001, 73). The structure they envisage is bounded, but firmly embedded in local and wider social networks (Willhauck and Thorpe, 2001, 150-151). It transmits itself not through the teaching of a body of knowledge but through a shared 'community of mutual learning' (Willhauck and Thorpe, 2001, 107-108).

Third, Jorg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan discuss how the Occupy movement (a primary exemplar of the kind of movement discussed by Castells) has brought people together from a wide variety of religious traditions and contexts, and encouraged them to rethink how they organize and associate (Rieger and Kwok, 2013, 49-55). Often these interactions centred on the creation of physical spaces where individuals could come together and interact (Rieger and Kwok, 2013, 49). Rieger and Kwok use these experiences to argue for a non-hierarchical kind of religious movement with no central command, which

'values the agency and self-organizing power of the people' (Rieger and Kwok, 2013, 120-121).

The contexts discussed by these authors all approximate to Castell's understanding of networked social movements. While Corrywright's example concerns individuals likely acting outside of formal structures, that of Willhauck and Thorpe concerns networks being created within and across the boundaries of a pre-existing formal structure. Rieger and Kwok's account concerns networks being created between individuals who are participating in unrelated formal structures. Of course the extent to which these examples are truly individualized and truly networked, and the ways these networks realize themselves, develop and sustain themselves over time will vary, and are open to empirical investigation. However these examples do suggest that, in principle at least, individualized religion may be understood as organizing itself through informal networks of autonomous individuals.

Finally, we need to understand the relationship between individuals as producers and the networks with which they coexist. Actor-network theory (ANT) works from the intuition that the most meaningful way to understand the social is to trace the associations of individual 'actors', rather than to accept and work with any assumed social structures (Latour, 2005, 3, 5 and 247). First, it views social structures as uncertain, contingent and constantly shifting (Latour, 2005, 27-42 and 87-120). Second, it views individual agency as causally embedded in the myriad influences of other actors (Latour, 2005, 43-62). Significantly, this set of influencing actors is not restricted to human equivalents, but can include a range of other entities including (for example) the narrative constructions of the actor under study, and non-human objects that are perceived as having had influence on the subject's actions (Latour, 2005, 47-48 and 63-76). Third, ANT deprioritizes both macro levels of association (viewing them not as overarching levels of reality but simply as additional local actors) and obvious influencers (instead looking out for multiple influences within the actors' orbit) (Latour, 2005, 173-218). Finally, ANT methodologically views its own accounts not as objective reports about what is going on but as subjectively written texts – stories – which capture as fully as possible the richness and range of associations of the actors under study, while at the same time recognizing their own inherent artificiality and incompleteness (Latour, 2005, 122-140).

As suggested by Corrywright (2003, 82), the holistic nature of web-type networks means that they do not have a single point of entry and can be investigated using multiple methods. However, Mika Lassander argues that ANT is especially useful in providing an open-ended methodology for exploring the complex intertwining of actors in vernacular religion, since religion, spirituality and society are seen not as pre-existing entities, but only as assemblages of actors, which Lassander claims avoids the prejudice of prior commitment to particular theories of the social (Lassander, 2012, 8-12).

Summarizing thus far, a plausible way of conceiving of at least some forms of individualized religion is as an embedded productive activity, with the following characteristics. First, while there may be some aspects of commercial

exchange present, individuals engage predominantly in informal and non-hierarchical networks primarily characterized by sharing and co-operation, explicit prioritization of individual freedom and a multiplicity of shifting and negotiated identities. Productive activity occurs both explicitly and implicitly at an individual level, as seekers actively develop their own spiritual path, but also through the action of myriad influencers, both human and non-human. The networks and communities that form are holistic, shifting and rhizomatic, and there is an ongoing dynamic relationship between individuals and the various networks in which they engage.

Individualized religion as communities of practice

To help understand whether and how these forms of individualized religion can successfully transmit themselves over time, we now return to the application of learning theory. As seen above, objectivist theories of learning are poorly suited to this kind of social structure, precisely because of its lack of acceptance of such a thing as objective knowledge. A better way of characterizing such forms is therefore through application of social constructivist theories of learning, specifically the notion of spontaneously generated communities of practice.

The theory of communities of practice is descended from the work of Lev Vygotsky, who understood learning not as a simple process of acquisition of knowledge and correct behaviour but as something ongoing and integral to our cultural and psychological development (Vygotsky, 1978, 84 and 90-91). Etienne Wenger, the theory's major proponent, defines communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, 2006). He argues that such groups are endemic to our existence, and that the theory can be applied to any such group, however informally constituted (Wenger, 1998, 6-7). A community of practice is a community of mutual engagement, whose actions are the subject of negotiation among the members (Wenger, 1998, 73-74). This negotiation is also a negotiation of meaning, which is enhanced by the diverse perspectives and understandings of the members, and leads not to them having the same views, but to a dynamically evolving negotiated shared practice (Wenger, 1998, 75-77 and 82). A community of practice is thus a joint enterprise, where members negotiate ongoing 'relations of mutual accountability' toward one another and toward the community as a whole (Wenger, 1998, 81-82). The community of practice will also develop for itself and then utilize a shared repertoire of resources, which facilitates engagement and practice (Wenger, 1998, 82-83). These might include 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice' and also provide the community with a shared sense of history and identity (Wenger, 1998, 83).

A community of practice is thus a mutually engaged learning community with diffuse and often unclear boundaries through which members dynamically define their own levels of allegiance. It provides them with access to the

competence and understanding it has generated, but also depends on their individual experience and views for the exploration and creation of new insights (for example see Wenger, 1998, 214). It provides a shared identity of participation, predicated on the ongoing transformation of knowledge (Wenger, 1998, 215).

Because a community of practice can be an informal and fluid entity, it need not coincide with any formal group, and commitment to formal groups is unnecessary for the continued existence and development of such a movement. The commitment that matters is not to an official view of what's right, but to one's own development, to the shared resource set, and (for as long as it persists) to the shared sense of identity. Consensus in this context does not consist in total agreement, but in contingent shared ownership of a joint project. Diversity of views and approaches keeps the community dynamic, and the tension between the individual and community, while still present, can be constructive rather than destructive. Cohesion is dependent on the identification with the shared project, joint activity, and the shared set of resources.

The specific explanatory value of the application of learning theory in general and communities of practice in particular, is therefore in helping to understand the differences between individualized forms of association and traditional hierarchical forms, specifically in terms of how the transmission of a movement's values and ideas over time can plausibly occur in epistemically individualized contexts. While communities of practice do allow for negotiation and the sharing of purpose and resources, they do so in a non-hierarchical way that preserves the autonomy, diversity and variant points of view of their constituent members.

Conclusion

Implicit in common formulations of Secularization Theory is the idea that individualized religion is structurally non-viable and is therefore a secularizing force. Arguments for the non-viability of individualized forms of religion/spirituality such as these rest on the twin assumptions that effectively functioning religion must inspire commitment and create change through top-down exertion of authority over its members, and that continued levels of personal belief and practice depend on the continued existence and influence of the particular institutions through which that authority and those beliefs and practice have traditionally been propagated. However these assumptions are flawed, because they are predicated on objectivist theories of learning, and because they privilege traditional hierarchical forms of association.

Individualized religion can plausibly be better understood by bringing together a range of theoretical strands that together are able to recognize and explore its distinctive characteristics. Working from a model of individualized religion wherein participants are understood not as passive consumers but as active consumer-producers, leads to conceptions of actively self-directed individuals embedded in non-hierarchical shared spaces of mutual exchange. Vernacular religion helps in understanding the implicit aspects of individual religion, while

ANT helps in understanding the embeddedness of individuals within their networks of influencers. Application of learning theory helps in understanding the transmission of ideas and values and behaviour along horizontal or rhizomatic lines of transmission. Together, these add up to a set of concepts that can potentially be used to model how individualized religion can successfully transmit itself over time, not as transmission of a fixed and monolithic set of ideas and behaviours, but as an ongoing and dynamic cauldron of creativity and exchange.

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