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God's absence as characteristic of faith: Implicit religion and Edward Bailey (1935–2015) [1]

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Abstract

In this article, an analysis is provided of the concept of implicit religion as it was employed in the work of Edward Bailey. The methodology of implicit religion will be characterised and illustrated, also comparatively with brief reference to somewhat related matters in theology and in the social sciences. In broadest scope here, the concept of implicit religion is placed within post-secular context.

Key words

Edward Bailey; implicit religion; post-secularism

Doggone it, God done it; or: the West meets its Maker again; or: Let God be

The most ancient of religious statements in the Graeco-Western cultural stream, is the remark by the 7th–6th century philosopher Thales (attributed as such in Aristotle's *De Anima* 411a7-8): "πάντα πλήρη θεῶν" ("Everything is full of gods"; Bosman 2016). Neither exactly Implicit Religion nor for instance Civil Religion (Bailey 1998, 20-24), with its panentheistic tones this early pronouncement, is imbedded in a culture of thoroughgoing religiosity (Spencer 2015, 31-34). This in a way formulates a motto for the greater part

1 The nascence of this article lies in conference presentations at Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland; at Sarum College, Salisbury, UK; and at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, between 2012 and 2016.

of the following centuries and millennia. This motto thus establishes a framework, historically and conceptually, also for one of the more recent articulations of related intent, Implicit Religion. The latter refers to the phenomenon that a god-sense remains pervasive, palpably so for those who know how to see it, even within Modernist and post-Modernist cultural conditions (Goosen 2007; Taylor 2007) – cultural conditions in which the divine plays, to the public mind, hide and seek. With God mostly hidden from public view, we may perhaps now see God, but then again we don't. Precisely therein lies the beauty of the conceptual language of Implicit Religion: the *deus absconditus* and the *praesentia dei* can be valid – both, and at once: "God is not-t/here-yet-t/here" (Lombaard 2015, 92).

That the divine can be "seen" in certain scenes, leads me to be at interpretative odds, slightly, with the standard placement of Implicit Religion within post-Modernism, both by Bailey himself and by his interpreters (Keenan 2012, 5-24). However, based on a neo-realist kind of theological possibility (Bhaskar 2002) in which epistemology no longer trumps ontology in all respects as post-Modernism would have it, it seems cogent to place this concept of Implicit Religion within a post-secular ambience.

Why is that important already at this stage of my argumentation? Because it colours all of my understanding of Bailey and his work on Implicit Religion.

In his influential article on this matter, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society", Habermas (2008, 17-29) formulates the dawning realisation – already sociologically established in the work of for example Berger (1999) – of the about-turn on religion: that matters of faith are not fading in their public impact, as had widely been forecast, but are rather changed. The expectation amongst the intellectually formed leadership of Western/ised societies, naturally schooled with the masterminds of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Durkheim and Freud, could not but include the demise of religion. This forecast may have become a self-fulfilling prophecy within a large part of the intellectually formed leadership classes, but had not been carried through to the rest of society, we now know sociologically. Quantitatively and qualitatively, religious adherence may have changed during the Secular Age (the language of Taylor 2007), but that did not include the passing of God from individual hearts or collective impact – as Bailey (2001, 1998) and others employing

the concept of Implicit Religion (e.g. the essays collected in Bailey 2002) have argued too.

The focus in Habermas (2008, 17-29) is, however, not only internally referential, on acknowledging God-talk and godly deeds to be alive-though-changed *within* the Modern/ist world, but on the West meeting its Maker again through the crossing of borders. With that most unwanted of at times religion-related expression, violence, coming to the fore in the form of the "9/11" (11 September 2001) events, it was clear that faith employed politically was on the international relations agenda again, most forcefully. This was an outflow of another factor, that fundamentalist radicalisation of faith commitments had become influential in various socio-political ways. These two factors, along with missionary expansion, meant that new instabilities were afoot within societies, and along with that went altered identities. God had become *handy* again for some, and was *at hand* for many more people than had been the case just a decade or two earlier. This gives rise to the post-secular, which is not new in its diverse contents, but is different in the ways in which aspects of its contents are related to one another (Lombaard 2015, 87-88):

> Whereas in pre-modern society God was everywhere and in modern/post-modern society God was (almost) nowhere, both seem at the same time to be sound within a post-secular society. On personal, experiential scale, the expression "turn to spirituality" characterises helpfully, despite objections, increased interest in new or ancient or alternative religions and, within established Christianity, in the quest for more experiential and mystic dimensions to faith. On a broader scale, communities are making sense of different incarnations of the Divine with which they are faced… This "everywhereness" of the religious is not experienced as divine omnipresence; though its sources lie far and wide, it is encountered locally and most often unreflectively. Still – the age-old problem of finding God, solved in various Christian traditions by theological emphases on respectively the church, or liturgy, or the sacraments, or the Scriptures, or the Holy Spirit, or liberation, or nature – the Divine remains concealed, and even if perhaps found concretely through experience or conversion or revelation or reason, remains ineffable.

The latter relates well to the concept and methodology of Implicit Religion, which may therefore be understood within such a post-secular ambience, precisely because it moves us beyond the closed secularist assumptions. This is also, because Implicit Religion is so sensitive to the *experience* of faith commitments – the emergent basic post-secular criterion of validity (over against, as basic criteria of validity, history for Modernism, and language for post-Modernism). Thirdly, a related characteristic is that Implicit Religion seeks aspects of the holy in common life, rather than in theories on society. These three matters place, to my mind, Implicit Religion and the work of Edward Bailey within the sphere of the post-secular, namely as precursors of or antecedents to this increasingly acknowledged newest of broadly-cultural phases in Western/ised societies.

The usual descriptions of what constitutes Implicit Religion demonstrate this point. From Bailey, his followers and his debaters mentioned above[2], certain central conceptual and methodological aspects emerge. These include seeing what is there, even though it is not often or not easily seen – resonating with for instance the *via negativa* so important for the discipline of Christian Spirituality – namely an expression of an aspect of faith, which is the experiential dimension so central to the phenomenon of spirituality.

On the scales of empiricism and interpretavism, Implicit Religion is methodologically speaking clearly closer to the latter. Hermeneutics would, rather than for instance statistics, be an allied discipline. In its interpretavism, however, Implicit Religion does not go as far as for instance classical Freudianism does, namely to the extent that it cannot function with the falsifiability criterion in Popper's philosophy of science. Therefore, being more moderate, Implicit Religion is open to empirical approaches too, as for instance the Lord 2008 dissertation, "Quantifying Implicit Religion", demonstrated. In general, though Implicit Religion methodologically employs interpretative strategies that are akin to participant-observant,

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2 See also dictionary entries such as:

Implicit religion. (2006). In D Jary and J Jary (eds.), *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*. London, United Kingdom: Collins. [Online]. Available: http://0-search.credoreference.com.oasis.unisa.ac.za/content/entry/collinssoc/implicit_religion/0

Religion. (2006). In B. Turner (Ed.), *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. [Online]. Available: http://0-search.credoreference.com.oasis.unisa.ac.za/content/entry/cupsoc/religion/0

historical, culture-critical, sociological and perhaps introspective methods of analysis, with a kind of *Aha-Erlebnis* (psychologist Karl Bühler's fitting formulation; Bühler 1907, 14) often characterising the insights gained. This, all, may fall within a theological framework, not always specified, but at times quite clear, for instance in Bailey's 1990 essay, "The "Implicit Religion" Concept as a Tool for Ministry". In general, though, confessionality in the sense of a specific faith commitment is no requirement here, as De Groot (2012, 458) indicates:

> What holds the "Implicit Religion" project together is the encouragement to look for religion where one would not expect it. A variety of social phenomena cannot be understood properly without considering those aspects which are usually subsumed under the heading of "religion". What advances the study of Implicit Religion is their uncovering, thereby promoting interaction between sociology of religion and other sub-disciplines. What might hamper the study of Implicit Religion is an on-going discussion of the definition of Implicit Religion as if it were a phenomenon itself. Although this is certainly a way to claim a unique field of expertise, it would be contrary to our mission: to highlight parallels, connections, and shifting distinctions, between the religious and the secular…and to show how religious experience, beliefs, ritual and ethics appear, decontextualized, in other fields.

In a sense, then, Implicit Religion is methodologically inherently a semiotic discipline, reading as it does signs in order to gauge what they convey – and Semiotics is a strongly post-modern kind of inquiry, where everything becomes "language" or "texts" to be "read". However, within Implicit Religion the signs of inferred religiosity are not automatically understood in a non-referential manner, in either a linguistic or a theological sense, with the externally non-referential aspect, from New Criticism, in the post-modern understanding of everything as "text" having been intensely difficult to deal with theologically. Within Implicit Religion the signs may be un-real (ontologically empty) if the interpreter/s studied sense them to be such, but if referentiality is sensed to be concrete (ontologically filled) on the part of the interpreter/s involved, it is accepted as such within the ambit of Implicit Religion as an analytical approach. Within Modernism (even if aspects of it are fading) God could thus be un-dead too, as Implicit

Religion would then indicate. Traces of the divine may however be detected too – with these traces that may be understood in Derrida's sense of endless *différence* (Derrida 1976), or as in some mystical way tethered to an actual referential anchor (which approaches Critical Realism, a newer strand of thinking on the ontological-epistemological scales that escapes post-Modernism's social constructivist determinism). God could be let be, but also God could be let *be*.[3]

The concept of implicit religion has thus been instrumental in giving expression to the sense, within an era of Modernist – post-modernist sensibilities, that despite their muting impulses, God keeps putting in an appearance – even if just for a moment, and seen from a certain perspective, perhaps as with a Higgs boson particle. Though God may be deceased to the public mind, or more agnostically formulated: missing in action, the divine remains present culturally, sociologically and personally, in unexpected places and ways. Hence, the kind of "second coming" of the religious we see currently across various academic disciplines (Lombaard 2016: 1-6), as indicators of a currently more strongly unfolding post-secular cultural climate.

What implicit religion is, and isn't

It is surprising that the concept of implicit religion has not become much more influential in mainstream theological thinking than it has. Apart from in certain relatively small circles, more open to social scientific

3 As this is summarized in Lombaard 2017: In the post-secular era… (t)o be a-religious or anti-religious is fully in order, but then: no less so, and no more so, than being religious. For religious people this means: whether the existence of God can be proven or not (the Modernist debate), whether faith like all other aspects of humanity is a "language game" or not (the post-Modernist discussion), the experience of God in the life of individuals and the lives of groups is so concrete that it cannot be denied. Those effects can be seen in society as much as in the lives of individuals. Neither concrete proof nor reason nor language makes God actual: the way God touches people makes the Divine so very real that the concreteness of God supersedes all other aspects of believers' concrete lives (this recoups in a sense the pre-modern realism about God, but now not as Truth, but as Experience). However, precisely the mystery that God cannot be proven (the problem of Secularism) means that the God-hood of God can be felt, and can be expressed through what religious people do or do not do. This feeling-and-doing is the post-secular *experience* of faith (and here, still, non-faith or anti-faith remains experiential options) – which denies none of the earlier awarenesses or problems, but does not get completely entangled by them. Rather, religious people move on in belief – as an act of faith, in experienced grace and in expressed service.

approaches related to theology, this concept has not become part of the common theological nomenclature or conceptualature. The potential of Implicit Religion in analysing context for various purposes, however, becomes clear once just a few instances of its interpretative power are encountered. Therefore, three such instances are given below. (This is done well also in Bailey's 1998 book, *Implicit Religion. An introduction*.) Because Implicit Religion may, however, also resonate with other extant *topoi* in theological discussions, its difference from some of these is indicated too, very briefly.

A first example may be drawn from the Bible, namely the case of the book of Song of Songs (Porter 2009: 275). This collection of erotic poetry namely contains no explicit reference to God, yet is included in the canon, and went on to become the most commentated Bible book of the church in pre-modern times – this, always in spiritualised fashion. Both in its inclusion in the Bible and in its reception, an implicitly religious atmosphere to this collection had clearly been inferred. The sense was strong,[4] despite quite obvious criteria that could be argued for to the contrary (the subject matter; the strong Egyptian literary influence; the absence of God), that something of the divine emanates from those verses.

A second example is the use of implicit religion as an analytical tool to understand current social phenomena. Thus the popular modern deeply connected association with, for instance, a sports team (Uszynski 2013) or with electronics brands (Haughey and Campbell 2013: 104-105; Lam 2001: 243-262) takes on decidedly religious overtones, though clearly as a secular expression. The forms of experienced attachment and the manners in which this is given expression to, phenomenologically parallel most closely religious involvement in more faith-oriented times, and may well express something of an inherent human yearning for meaningful attachment to larger-than-oneself involvements.

Lastly, linguistic legacies from earlier (or current) religious adherence constantly colour speech. Instances such as nurses being addressed as "sister" reflect the heritage of nuns as caregivers in infirmaries[5]; set habits

4 It remains so too, often in its older form, but also in more modern expressions.

5 This term has become controversial, because of both its religious and gender connotations.

described as "doing something religiously" reflects liturgical language; exclamations such as "OMG!" and "Jesus!" may have lost their devotional orientation, yet retain their expressive power precisely because of the prohibition of the Second Commandment, suggesting a lingering Judeo-Christian taboo; more iconically, the cross as a fashion neck piece, even an item of bling, carries religio-cultural ironies and semiotic surprises that could be explored at book-length. On the one hand, instances like these may reflect religious life merely residually, similarly to military language remaining the unrealised background metaphor in discussions when someone's argument may be "shot down". On the other hand, though, the pervasiveness of such legacies makes them more than just unintentional withdrawals from cultural memory banks; they form identity, in some ways. Moreover, such "symbols" from the past that retain fuller significance for only a few of the groups that comprise the social whole, at times return to greater prominence in quite unexpected ways, as the internet and social media ages have done for the earlier quite obscure @ and # symbols. Related to religion, this can in some parallel manner be observed in for instance the unforeseen prominence of specifically Christian or more generally religious terms and themes in many rock songs, popular book series (the Harry Potter series provides a good instance) and serialised DVD dramas (e.g. Game of Thrones, Battlestar Galatica, The Mindy Project, and so forth).

Implicit religion as a conceptual tool with which to indicate instances such as these examples above has the heuristic value, as with all hermeneutically useful concepts that it leads to greater insight into phenomena in the world in which we live.

Three such hermeneutically useful concepts which may be related to Implicit religion, yet which do not refer to the same intellectual engagement, are Karl Rahner's understanding of "anonymous Christianity"[6] in his *Theological Investigations,* volumes 6, 10, 12, 14 and16 (conveniently collected and discussed in brief by Sau 2001, 23-39), on the salvific extension of Christ's significance beyond Christian borders; the mystic insight[7] on the "one and many" or the "whole and part" (Krüger 2006: 30-31), in which the

6 My thanks to colleague Paul Decock from Pietermaritzburg for indicating this possibility.

7 My thanks to Pretoria colleague Kobus Krüger for indicating this possibility.

interrelationships of all that is entangle themselves essentially; and the concept from sociology of "spiritual capital" (Bourdieu 1986, 241-258; O'Sullivan and Flanagan 2012). The latter, however, has to do with social networks of practice that draw on commonalities in order to act, which commonalities in some cases consist mainly of a shared religious framework that facilitates deeds. This is something different to implicit religion, which identifies unintentional signs of faith both inside and outside of religious communities, without the necessity of social action included. The former concept, "anonymous Christianity", is a theological consideration on salvation related to the necessity of a relationship with Christ, or not, set within a history of religions discussion. With implicit religion, though, there is no direct concern with the status of the relationship *coram Deo* of the person/s, group/s, symbol/s or institution/s involved. Implicit Religion is more descriptively oriented (which is important to note, especially where it is at times misunderstood as having primarily missionary intentions). In a way, Implicit religion comes close to the "one and many" or "whole and part" concepts, though less essentialistically and not with such an all-encompassing grasp on existence in which all and everything are related, yet at the same time in a sense sovereign. Rather, more modestly, those aspects of religiosity that have in some ways remained or become hidden within the greater social whole are unveiled with implicit religion. In all three these cases the fruitful, or perhaps confusing, overlap between the interpretative categories can be detected, and remain available for further exploration. However, implicit religion as a construct cannot say as much of substance as can these three instances on, respectively, personal salvation, deep reality or social action. Yet, it can see more than these three examples of the concrete impulses of the religious that come to the fore in signs of faith around us.

3. PS: IR with EB

Though I only once had the pleasure of personally meeting Edward Bailey, in April 2010 at the "Claiming Conceptual Space. Reimagining the Study of Religion and Theology: Changing Contexts and Social Discourse" conference in Wellington, South Africa, his uncanny ability to see moments of surprising faith in our common existence attracted me to him and to his concept of implicit religion. I call it "his" concept, though not the sole

proprietor of it, he is certainly regarded as the most influential proponent and exponent of implicit religion.

Where does the concept come from? The more modern formation and purpose of the concept have been amply described by Bailey himself (Bailey 2002, iii–vii, 2001, 1998, 1997) and by others (e.g., substantially, Lord 2008: 9-73) and have been subject to some debate. The intention here is, therefore, to frame the concept of and possibilities with implicit religion more widely, also adding further clarity to the understanding here of implicit religion as a post-secular discipline, albeit as one of the antecedents to this currently unfolding broadly cultural phase.

In the Judeo-Christian cultural-historical stream, namely, apart from the ancient Greek impulse from Thales's πάντα πλήρη θεῶν "motto", an early Jewish parallel[8], or perhaps unrealised influence, may be discerned too. A Decalogue commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 already carries in it seeds of what could become implicit religion – albeit with the latter in a Modernist – post-Modernist context that is (almost) emptied of gods, whereas in the Ancient Near East a world other than one in which πάντα πλήρη θεῶν was unimaginable (at least before substantial contact with Greek culture):

> Ex 20:4-5a (King James translation):
>
> Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.

With a God understood, quite possibly only from exilic or post-exilic times (respectively dating from 586 and 539 BCE onwards), as per definition not representable in order to safeguard the divine holiness, signs of this divinity's activities then had to be detected. That was done for instance in history (discerning God's activity in the past), through prophecy (divine call or revelation) and via wisdom (revelation through accumulated human experience) – all requiring interpretative acts to "see" the hand of God active in these aspects of life. Without seeing the signs of God, there would

8 Thanks to my University of South Africa colleague, Eben Scheffler, from whose moment of insight this argument flows.

be no God in these aspects of ancient Jewish life. The interpretative act of finding God implied in these aspects counts among the most enduring spiritual exercises of humanity. Without statues of YHWH, ancient Israel had to "see" God everywhere.

Though the phenomenological characteristics resulting from faith, in three religions, resulting from this particular Decalogue prohibition, have never been paid much heed, it provides an existential and intellectual religio-cultural arena for what was to follow.

One much later phenomenologically parallel aspect to this, that had never been widely popular, but persistently present, was the *via negativa* in Christian spiritual expression. In this form of Christian life-and-confession, the sense of the Holy or of the otherness (other-than-humanness) of the Holy is given expression to by *not* saying what or who or how God is. The ineffability of the divine is such that an overwhelming sense dawns that God cannot be said; even to the point that the word "God" is too confident: it says too much, because it says too little. In this aspect too an aspect of the Jewish tradition echoes, namely of not giving voice to the tetragrammaton יהוה / YHWH, but pronouncing it as Adonai or ha-Shem, respectively "the Lord" or "the Name". The divine presence in such circumstances is given expression to most poignantly by giving non-expression to it – again (Lombaard 2015: 92), "God is not-t/here-yet-t/here".

Returning to mainstream Christianity, for the moment to review another much later development, and in very broad historical strokes: of the post-Constantine Christian West (i.e. from the fourth century CE, when Christianity became the official Roman religion), and from Europe across the Westernised-Christianised world, it has often been said that the seeds for the deconstruction of the religion of this civilisation lie within the make-up of this religion itself. Christianity, having absorbed the essentially foreign ancient Greek philosophy as its interpretative core, carried forward culturally the possibility of self-criticism (which is precisely what makes this such an enduring, and for intellectuals endearing, culture); this, even to the point of nihilism and – more important for the interests here – including the possibility of atheism as a valid philosophical, cultural and personal orientation. The cultural success of such an atheist expression, at least among the intellectual elite within the modernist – post-modernist phase

(and unique amongst the civilisations of the world), had been enabled by the form of religiosity which had in/formed much of Western history. The ancient Greek sources incorporated into the Christian West, in the form of the philosophers' thorough and wide-ranging speculations on religion, are more freely recognised than another feeding bed to this cultural stream, the Ancient Near Eastern, most particularly Hebrew, sources (Lombaard 2011: 74-93). The "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image…" seeds to secularisation, amongst others from the Hebrew Scriptures, have however not lain dormant in our culture, historically and contemporarily, although the ancient Greek influences predominate.[9]

From these all too broadly sketched historical influences, though the outlines are clear enough for the argument here to be followed, the somewhat tongue in cheek formulation may be proposed that (at least Western/ised) atheism is a Christian enterprise. Even if that is valid only to a limited extent that combined with the constant self E reflective/self E critical make-up of this culture means also that faith would not lightly die. Also in a strongly a- or anti-theistic modernist – post-modernist culture, at least publicly and in certain layers of society, cracks would remain for religion to show through, even to grow through. One such growth was implicit religion.

The widely-applicable interpretative manoeuvrability of implicit religion explains also the kinds of subject matter it has been related to in various studies. These include not only the studies where the title, language and methodology clearly link to implicit religion, but also the less noticeable, though no less real, intellectual train of influence.[10]

The latter characterisations do not add particular weight to the interpretative move here to place implicit religion within a post-secular framework; they are more general in nature. However, in drawing together anew the pre-modern and the current (Lombaard 2015, 82-95); in finding

9 The argument can be made here too from Weber that the Calvinist roots of our capitalist culture (Otto 2005a and 2005b), given to symbolism in its interpretation of the most concrete ecclesial acts of divine interaction, the sacraments, add yet more resonance to this long-term cultural construction.

10 As is the case for instance amongst Dutch academics: via Ter Borg's Een *uitgewaaierde eeuwigheid* (1991) to Schrijvers' *Between faith and belief. Toward a contemporary phenomenology of religious life* (2016).

in the previous, awkward century a way to sense the divine; to do so by paying attention to the *usual* and to the *experience* of faith within the usual – in these four respects Bailey and implicit religion fit better within a post-secular framework, namely as antecedents; perhaps even as heralds of our currently unfolding cultural climate.

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