Chapter 10
Religion and the Social Economy: Elective Affinities

Malcolm David Brown
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT
This chapter presents “elective affinities” between, on the one hand, strands in contemporary religiosity that seek to rediscover or reinterpret older religiosities in a contemporary context and idiom (e.g. liberation theology, multi-faith activity, the SBNR - spiritual but not religious - phenomenon, and the new monasticism), and, on the other hand, the contemporary phenomenon of the social economy (social business, social enterprise, and the sharing economy). As the social economy occupies a space between the values of capitalism and the strategies of socialism, rooted in a civil society that strives to maintain a freedom from both the economy and the state, so these religious phenomena occupy a space between secularisation and sacralisation, between a separation of church and state and a subsumption of state under church. They are all concerned with social justice now (rather than after the revolution), and bear witness to a potential for religious and societal transformation.

INTRODUCTION
It is instructive that, of Ninian Smart’s (1998) celebrated seven dimensions of religion, the material dimension was a late addition, some three decades after the original (1969) list. Although Max Weber’s (1958 [1904-5]) historical sociological work on the material dimension of Protestantism has long been regarded as one of the most important works of sociology ever written, it is a dimension that is all too often treated either as an afterthought or as something to be circumscribed (a sub-category of the sociology of religion that is for specialists only). As a small contribution to rectifying this situation, this chapter draws on ethnographic (including virtual-ethnographic and auto-ethnographic) data and theoretical reflection to examine elective affinities between some strands in contemporary religiosity and the contemporary group of phenomena referred to as the social economy, which are defined below. It

draws on some of the current author’s previous work, especially Brown (2012), but greatly expands the scope of that article to analyse social enterprise and the sharing economy (also known as collaborative consumption), as well as Muhammad Yunus’s (2010) concept of social business - a specifically Asian model that has also been influential in addressing social problems in Western multicultural societies. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to provide evidence for those elective affinities, and to argue that they bear witness to a potential for religious and societal transformation.

Weber’s (1958, 1968) concept of elective affinity (Wahlverwandtschaften) is a term that he borrowed from Goethe. Richard Howe (1978) examines Weber’s choice of terminology in more detail than is appropriate here, and, while it is to some extent legitimate to use the term to refer to similarities or overlaps between religious and other social phenomena, and also to the impact of religion on society, we should note that Weber does not argue that the Protestant ethic “caused” the spirit of capitalism; if we follow his methodology, then what we are really looking for is “kinship by choice” (an alternative translation of Goethe’s term), an indication that the phenomena have, as it were, chosen the same thing, but not that they have necessarily chosen each other. While Howe concludes that “Weber never worked out the logical consequences implicit in his usage of elective affinity” (1978, p. 382), the notion of kinship by choice can at least be illustrated by observing that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism both involve the choice of a formally rational worldview centred on means-ends calculation and a progressive disenchantment of the world. In examining the elective affinities between distinctly contemporary religiosity and the social economy, then, we are looking for similarities between the two, and for a common choice of worldview and praxis.

The social economy can be defined quite broadly, as rooted in civil society, but with a more restricted definition of social business, social enterprise, and the sharing economy as specific subsets of the social economy (and social business mainly as a subset of social enterprise, but intersecting with microcredit). As these terms may be unfamiliar to readers of this book, the following working definitions are proposed:

- **Social Enterprise**: Although this term has many different statutory definitions and even more academic ones, it refers to using private-sector methods, particularly trade, to address social and environmental problems. Some social enterprises are set up for the purpose of employing people who might otherwise find it difficult to find employment.
- **Social Business**: A subset of social enterprise implying an association with the ideas of Muhammad Yunus and a commitment to his seven principles of social business, discussed below. Used mainly, though by no means exclusively, in developing countries.
- **Microcredit**: Also developed by Muhammad Yunus, this refers to the use of small collateral-free loans to help people escape from poverty and long-term dependence on moneylenders (though the reality does not always live up to the ideal).
- **Sharing Economy**: Also known as collaborative consumption, this can refer to alternative methods of exchange such as Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS), and to the commercialisation of sharing through entities such as Airbnb and Uber.
- **Civil Society**: The “third sector” after the economy and the state, the sphere of voluntary cooperation for social capital, “the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space” (Waltzer, 1995, p. 7).