The Idea of Progress: An Implicit Western Faith

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Abstract

This paper challenges the idea of progress as an underlying ideology of Western civilization and identifies its role in modern day society on a philosophical level. The origin and development of this idea is presented through a historical review of sources back from ancient Greece to the works of prominent scholars including Comté and Darwin among others. Furthermore this paper includes a discussion on secularization and the state of religion in modern Danish society which is elaborated on through an interdisciplinary approach involving neuroscientific research on religious cognition. Finally, a commercial is analyzed through the framework of Durkheim’s work on religion in relation to progress portrayed in the media. This creates a thought provoking reflection on the Western societies’ implicit faith in progress.
Resumé

Ud fra et filosofisk perspektiv sætter denne opgave spørgsmålstegn ved ideen om fremskridt som en underliggende ideologi for den vestlige civilisation. Oprindelsen og udviklingen af denne ide er præsenteret igennem en idehistorisk gennemgang af kilder tilbage fra antikkens Grækenland til Comté og Darwins akademiske værker m.fl.

Ydermere indeholder denne opgave en diskussion om sekulariseringsteorien og om religionens rolle i det moderne danske samfund, som er uddybet igennem en interdisciplinær fremgangsmåde som indeholder neurologisk forskning omkring religiositet og hjerneaktivitet. Til sidst analyseres en reklame igennem Durkheims religionsteori for at fremhæve et eksempel på diskurs omkring fremskridt i medierne.

Dette tilsammen skaber en tankevækkende, reflekterende opgave omkring det vestlige samfunds implicitte tro på fremskridt.
Indhold

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 5

Problem Definition .................................................................................................................................. 6

Methodology .......................................................................................................................................... 8

A historical account of the idea of progress ......................................................................................... 13

The relationship between secularization and progress ........................................................................ 26

The Durkheimian approach to religion .............................................................................................. 34

The neurological perspective on religion ............................................................................................. 38

Towards an understanding of the dispersion of religion ....................................................................... 46

Commercials as a mediator ..................................................................................................................... 50

Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................. 55

Reference list .......................................................................................................................................... 59
Introduction

In contemporary Western society with the ongoing global unrest and the recent economic crisis, one may have doubts about the inevitability of social progress. This doubt may be spurred further by several problematic developments including the declining ability of governments to take care of the majority’s interests, a health crisis in terms of a great number of starving people, and on the other side of the scale, obese people, and a looming environmental crisis potentially threatening human existence. This has motivated us to trace the origin of the idea of progress and to uncover its implicit role in modern day society. As certain as people of the Middle Ages were of the existence of an afterlife, as certain people today seem of the idea that technology will deliver us from most of the aforementioned threats. However, this ideology goes further to include a faith that not only technology, but also civilization and the evolution of man, as a biological organism, will continue to progress towards an increasingly desirable future. What we aim to do is to challenge this idea through a historical review of its origins and development, and to reveal its quasi-religious elements through a neuroscientific perspective.
Another motivation for this paper is the assumption that Danish society should be primarily atheist and secularized, and thus that it should have somehow progressed beyond traditional religion. This has made us look into the secularization theory in general, and also the work of Durkheim on religion in societies. Through this interdisciplinary inquiry, also drawing on neuroscientific research done on brain areas related to religious cognition, we wish to enhance our understanding of the relationship between religion and the idea of progress, and how these might be found present in modern Danish media.

We intend for this paper to be broad and holistic in scope, and to take a hermeneutic approach to understanding a modern societal ideology on a philosophical level.

**Problem Definition**

There seems to be a discrepancy between the imagined progress of society, and its actual progress, which also relates to the alleged abandonment of religion. How can the claimed secularization of religion in Western society be linked together with the implicit, societal faith in progress, and how is this faith illustrated in modern day commercials?
RQ1: How can the idea of progress be traced in historical writings, in terms of its origin, and how has it been extended from meaning technological development to become a concept including social and evolutionary progress?

RQ2: How does the secularization thesis relate to the idea of technological, social and evolutionary progress, and how can it be challenged by modern neuroscience that links brain activity with religious cognition?

RQ3: How can the dispersion of traditional religion in modern society be conceptualized through a Durkheimian perspective?

RQ4: How do modern commercials and media draw on the human meaning making tendency, formerly expressed in religion, to promote messages of morality, cooperation and progress?
Methodology

In the following we will list the delimitations and possible weaknesses of the different methodologies of each section of the paper:

The first part of this paper is based on and inspired primarily by Sidney B. Fay’s historical essay to describe the phenomenon termed as the “Idea of Progress”. As such we do not challenge his perspective but instead we use his essay to provide a chronological presentation of the idea of progress as an underlying trend of Western Civilization. On a fundamental level, challenging the idea of progress implicitly suggests that we have an alternative interpretation of the course of events. We do not claim the idea of progress to be completely misguided, but instead we wish to introduce a moderation of it in which cyclical and periodical variations occur that might even reverse “progress” to some extent.

In this paper, we trace the origin of the idea through the works of prominent scholars, thus only taking into account when this knowledge became manifested through Western scholarly work, which does not consider that this idea might have lingered in the minds of men before. Another point to make, and as Fay mentions, is that there is hardly any social change that is not called progress by somebody which is why our
perspective can be considered to be ethnocentric as we focus solely on a Western setting. For example from the view of a Chinese scholar, the idea of progress might have originated within another time period and in another geographical region and thus might have a significantly different connotation, however it will always be difficult and debatable to trace the origins of a fundamental idea and also to claim continuity through the course of 400 years. Describing this continuity we do not claim it to be a constant development, but instead a linkage between successive scholarly works all referring to an idea of progress in one domain or another.

A point worth noting is that a historian will always be placed in a specific social, cultural, economic and political context which we ourselves cannot rise above, and which Fay’s work also reflects. Sidney B. Fay was situated in a post-World War context, and one may rightfully argue that his essay is heavily influenced by this circumstance making his outlook excessively bleak. We do in our own presentation try to provide a more modern view, taking into account more recent developments, but we do share a somewhat bleak outlook as we ourselves are situated in a time of crisis.

In the second part of the paper we introduce the concept of secularization in order to challenge and refine it with the help of recent neuroscientific research. This section does not provide a comprehensive discussion of secularization, but instead attempts to
connect it to the idea of social progress. We do not provide a case based on statistics, as other secularization scholars have done, but instead challenge some of the inherent assumptions of secularization scholars. Considering the comprehensive nature of this field and the ongoing debate, we have chosen only to highlight certain aspects of this field.

Concerning the neuroscientific theories and studies referred to in this paper, we do not delve into the specific research designs and the more technical details of them, but instead use some of the dominant theories of the research to put neurological perspectives on the secularization debate. As a general critique, opponents of neuroscientific research and evolutionary explanations of human cognition may argue that complex human behavior cannot be reduced to observations made with MRI scans and may deem evolutionary explanations of religious cognition to be simplistic and speculative. Although we recognize this critique we still think that this research provides a compelling explanation of some human behavior and an additional angle to studying social phenomena.

The third and last part of the paper will try to provide an extended concept of religion through the work of Durkheim which corroborates with the neuroscientific perspective. This concept of religion enables us to perform a more functional analysis of the
fragments of religion still present in Danish society. We do however realize that an altered definition of religion stripped of the supernatural elements and strict institutional linkages, as the one Durkheim introduced, presents certain connotative problems. We do not wish to impose a new definition of religion, but instead we wish to question and analyze its transformation. As will be mentioned in the discussion, we do however not think it irrelevant whether religion is thought of as a thing of the past or not.

As a way to analyze the fragments of traditional religion, and specifically its meaning making component, we will briefly analyze the implicit ideology of a specific Danish commercial which we argue portrays the core belief of modern Danish society namely an implicit faith in progress to deliver society from social and economic crisis. This analysis is primarily hermeneutic in nature, thus it somewhat disregards the consumer interpretation process and instead tries to highlight narratives in the commercial resembling more an anthropological investigation.

All together this creates a paper more focused on providing a holistic account of historical and ideological assumptions on the level of ideology instead of it being basing on empirical observations, although we do provide a short analysis of a discourse in a
Danish commercial. We thus see this paper as covering the following three dimensions: History and Culture, Philosophy and Science and Text and Sign.
The idea that advances in science and social organization inevitably produce an improvement in the human condition has made prominent scholars like Robert Nisbet bluntly claim that “(...) No single idea has been more important than (...) the Idea of Progress in Western civilization(...)” (Nisbet 1980 p. 4) What we will see in the following section of this paper is an inquiry into the origins of the Idea of Progress in order to illustrate how it can be argued to have manifested itself on three fundamental levels, namely a technological, social and evolutionary level and how this progress combined has become the fundamental notion of modern Western civilization.

The historical aspect of this section will be based on Sidney B. Fay’s essay from 1947. In his work, Fay tries to identify the origins of the fundamental idea that the development of Western civilization is thought to progress or, put in another way “that civilization has moved, is moving and will continue to move in a desirable direction.” (Fay 1947 p. 231)

As a key insight Fay argues that the idea of progress is a subjective judgment since, as he states, “there is hardly any social change that is not called progress by somebody.” (Fay 1947 p. 231)
Drawing on the work of J.B Bury, an Irish historian who in 1920 wrote the scholarly contribution “The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth”, Fay starts his historical evaluation in ancient Greece. Investigating the idea of progress in ancient time, Fay notes that Greek thinkers and particularly Thucydides traced social progress through historical records, but that the time was dominated by the notion that man had flourished in an earlier age referred to as the “Golden age” after which toil, war, and disease had followed along with man’s decay and degeneration. (Fay 1947 p. 232)

Another famous Greek thinker, Plato, put forward the idea of recurring cycles of better and worse, where the Deity guides development for the first half of a period, which is then followed by a period of chaos. Interestingly enough, Plato created a template of gradual deterioration of social organization in which societies would go through the following different phases: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and despotism. Here despotism would be the last phase of deterioration in which a single entity would have absolute power, before the cycle reset.

The overall idea that it was outside of man’s grasp to control progress, was also held by Aristotle who thought that man should not tamper with the established order, and several Greek myths told of the perils of men trying to disturb it such as the story of Prometheus who was punished for stealing the fire of the Olympians. (Fay 1947 p. 233)

Neither the Romans, who were dominated by Greek thought, viewed progress in the
modern sense although it was the first time the term *progress* was used. Both Seneca and Lucretius appreciated that man had progressed through accumulation of knowledge, but did not see continued development as an interesting prospect. Lucretius nonetheless, in his great work on the rise of civilization, became the first to use the term progress.

Entering the Middle Ages, Fay takes point of departure in the writings of Saint Augustine which he sees as dominant for the period. As Fay writes the about the belief of Augustine, he seemed to think that,

“(...) the whole movement of history aimed to secure the happiness of an elect few in another world. He did not postulate a further and indefinite development of mankind on this earth. The Day of Judgment might come at any moment. History is a series of events ordered by divine intervention and revelation, that is, by an active Providence.” (Fay 1947 p. 234)

It seems appropriate however to question Fay’s brief account of the Middle Ages. According to Fay, Augustine’s Latin philosophy of original sin and “other worldliness” became the dominant influence for a thousand years. However, Fay fails to mention that during this considerable period of time Western civilization did witness intellectual and cultural revivals as seen in the eighth century Carolingian Renaissance. The societal
scope of this cultural revival is still being discussed by medievalist scholars, but the main point is that trying to capture the ethos of a thousand years of history is always problematic.

Advancing on to the Renaissance, it is noted that even though the period entailed a “revival of learning” there “(...) was such a veneration for the classical writers that ancient notions smothered the potential birth of a concept of progress.” (Faye 1947 p. 234)

In the course of the sixteenth century however, new discoveries influenced man to slowly rebel against the “tyranny” of the Antiquity. Prominent scholars of the time like Copernicus, Bernado Telesio, Jerome Cardan and Giordano Bruno attacked the great thinkers of the Antiquity, and especially Aristotle fell victim to heavy critique. Fay’s account of the sixteenth century is to a large extent guided by the work of the French jurist and political philosopher Jean Bodin (1530–1596), who published the Latin work Method for the Easy Understanding of History, in which he rejects the idea of Aristotle that man should not tamper with the established order. (Fay 1947 p. 235) As Bodin wrote,

“(...) [History] depends largely on the will of men, which is always changing; every day new customs, new laws, new institutions come into being, and also new errors,
resulting in a series of oscillations. Rise is followed by fall, and fall by rise.” (Fay 1947 p. 235)

However, as Fay notes, although he did describe the progress up until his time, he gave little attention to the future. Here the work of the English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon went much further. With the great discoveries of gunpowder, printing, the compass, and new lands overseas, Bacon declared that this was evidence for how rapidly knowledge was advancing. What is seen in the work of Bacon and Bodin is a gradual move towards a general idea of progress, but that they were still to some extent bound by the ancient classics.

Breaking completely with this trend was the work of Descartes. Descartes, unlike Bacon and Bodin, through his famous notion of the invariability of the laws of nature and the supremacy of reason, attacked the former authority of tradition and the doctrine of Providence. As Fay describes it,

“With magnificent self-confidence he (Descartes) looked forward to an advancement of knowledge in the future on the basis of his own analytical method and his own discoveries. He believed that this would bring far-reaching benefits to mankind.” (Fay 1947 p. 236)
So far this section has taken point of departure in ancient Greece, advanced on to the Middle Ages and The Renaissance, and has finally taken a sixteenth century perspective. More specifically we have acknowledged how the idea of progress seemed to remain at a status quo from the ancient Greek conception of alternating cycles of better and worse, to the Middle Ages which moved beyond the myths of the ancients but nevertheless saw God as the ultimate force of intervention. Moreover we have briefly looked at the Renaissance period which hindered a modern notion of progress due to a revival and glorification of ancient virtues. With emphasis on prominent scholars who attacked ancient thinkers, such as Descartes, we have been able to distinguish the sixteenth century as a time where the modern idea of progress gradually was manifesting itself as a basic notion for Western civilization. In the following we will move forward in history in order to grasp how the idea of progress has developed on three specific levels, namely a technological, social and evolutionary level.

Following the break away from the past, which had gradually begun in the sixteenth century, the writers, philosophers and scientist of the seventeenth century France popularized the idea of progress. During this century men like Newton, Boyle and Leibniz paved the way for great advancement in the natural sciences. Moreover, great recognition was given to the natural sciences by the founding of the royal academies of science. These achievements in the natural sciences had a big impact on the
strengthening of a general idea of progress, however some scholars criticized this idea as being too focused on technological advancement:

“Men like the fertile minded Abbe de Saint Pierre, Turgot, and the Encyclopedists turned to another aspect of it(???) to which Fontenelle had paid little attention-the art of living together, or social progress. What was the value of progress in science, if the conditions of life itself could not be ameliorated?” (Fay 1947 p. 236)

This dilemma of technological progress not necessarily translating into social progress is at the heart of Fay’s further inquiry.

In the nineteenth century Comte’s positivist philosophy emerged in which he called for a new social doctrine based on the sciences. Comte is considered to be the founding father of sociology because he introduced the scientific study of society as a system of institutions. The idea of social progress was furthered in popular imagination by the unique scientific discoveries and mechanical inventions which accompanied the spreading industrial revolution, overseas expansion, and the prosperous growth of the United States. Steam and the railway age shortened distances, economized time, and added in many ways to the material comforts of life. Electricity opened new vistas. Chemistry and biology prepared the way for great advances in medicine. (Fay 1947 p, 373).
The nineteenth century appears to be a vital time for which the idea of progress has manifested itself as the most essential notion of society, not only as a concept referring to technological progress, but now also social progress; that the social aspect of civilization should be refined and guided along with the technology advancements.

Expanding further on this line of thought, Michael Ruse tries to conceptualize it as a threefold parallelism. This parallelism of the idea of progress consists of societal progress, scientific progress, and evolutionary progress also referred to as the evolution of biological organisms. (Ruse in Nitecki 1992 p. 150) Through the optics of Ruse’s conception of progress, one can argue that, with the emergence of Comte’s positivist philosophy social progress became a vital component parallel to technological progress. According to Ruse, evolutionary progress is seen as the third essential component of the idea of progress which arose with the work of Darwin.

Alongside the publication of Darwin’s great work “On the Origin of Species” in 1859 came the different interpretations of it:

> “His doctrine of the evolution of species by adaptation and natural selection was strictly biological. It did not necessarily mean social progress, or, even when applied by analogy to society as an organism, that the movement of man was toward a desirable goal. It was a neutral, scientific conception, compatible with
either optimism or pessimism, and has in fact been interpreted in both ways.” (Fay 1947 p. 237)

In fact the English scholar and liberal Herbert Spencer (1820 –1903) coined the term “survival of the fittest”, in his work “Principles of Biology” (1864), after reading Charles Darwin’s research. It has been debated since whether Darwin’s work was a truly neutral perspective on evolution and natural selection, however Spencer very clearly tried to extend evolution into realms of sociology and ethics. Spencer’s conception of social progress was built on a strong rejection of reform legislation which he saw as interfering with the evolution of society. He became one of the most famous European intellectuals of his time and the Spencerian evolutionary concept of progress it can be argued has had a significant influence from that point on, but more generally this narrative seems to get adopted even by people who never heard of Spencer as an extension of Darwin’s perspective, and other scholars of the time presented works of the hierarchy of life with man at the top.

With the rise of pragmatism a new conception of progress emerged which varied from country to country. Put differently, the general belief in the idea was colored by the materiel conditions of each country. As an example, one might mention The Slavophile movement in Russia. Slavophilia was an intellectual movement originating from the
nineteenth century that wanted the Russian Empire to be developed upon values and institutions derived from its early history. Slavophiles were especially opposed to the influences of Western Europe, thus the general western idea of progress found great opposition in Russia at the turn of the century. The pure Marxist groups especially, were guided by a focus on revolutionary tendencies, however their ideas did not find fertile ground before 1905, though as Fay notes it was “pregnant for the future”.

Advancing to the horror of World War 1, the optimism was suddenly broken by the war of 1914-1918, the uneasy years of unemployment and depression, the failure of the League of Nations, and the frightful hatreds of World War 2 and its aftermath. Western civilization seemed to be turned back several centuries, thus contesting the idea of progress as a steady and linear concept. As a consequence of these devastating “blows”, more attention was given to the periods in time where man had halted or slipped back. The cycle theory that civilizations rise and fall, advance and retreat acquired force and more emphasis was put on warning that our much vaunted Western civilization might be at one of the downward turns of the cycle. (Fay 1947 p. 240) Yet despite the horrors of two great Wars, advances in physics, archeology, and anthropology widened our horizon. In this period, a tension also rose between social and technological progress, as Fay notes:
“Natural science has far outstripped social science. Our social skills have not kept pace with our technical skills. The consequences to society of this unbalance have been disastrous. We have discovered how to split the atom but not how to make sure that it will be used for the improvement and not the destruction of civilization.” (Fay 1947 p. 245)

In conclusion, it can be noted that Fay logically felt a strong urge to question the idea of progress given the time in which he wrote his essay. He published his essay The Idea of Progress in 1947, a time in which social progress and technological progress perhaps more than ever seemed to move in opposite directions.

So far this section has attempted to briefly illustrate the origins of the idea of progress which several scholars including Fay, Ruse and Nisbet argue has been a foundational concept for Western civilization. Entering the realm of social science, we see that progress has been a profound influence on scholars and writers, especially claiming its strong position in the nineteenth century where it came to be taken for granted as an axiomatic force and from this position one can argue that there has been derived “the ethical corollary that we can and ought to provide a progressively improved world for posterity.” (Fay 1947 p. 232) However, like Fay, we feel that it is important to
acknowledge the inherent paradox between technological progress on the one hand, and social and evolutionary progress on the other, which as will be discussed in a following section is still relevant in contemporary Western society.

Concerning the idea of social progress in modern time, we see it as having been divided into different ideologies. Prominent in our time seem to be at least three main ideologies that are not necessarily mutually exclusive or the only ones existing. These are the “green” movement, the “Marxist/socialist” movement and finally the “liberal” movement. Put shortly, the “green” movement which fights for a greener world has inhabited the minds of many to the extent that it resembles quasi-religious sentiment. In this movement there seems to be a belief that capitalist consumption and life styles are unnatural and that industrial society encroaches on nature’s domain for which the solution is to go back to a more basic society. Furthermore, it sees part of the solution in the transformation of the world’s energy producing technology into new green solutions and in curbing capitalist consumption. Moving on to the “Marxist/socialist” movement it focusses especially on an equal distribution of resources based on an egalitarian/humanitarian world view. Central to this belief is that human beings are all equally deserving and that most problems are a result of different types of inequality. Finally, the “liberal” movement puts the freedom of the individual at the center. It glorifies the virtue of hard work, but more fundamentally the achievement of man and
his ability to control his environment as well as his own destiny. As a desired outcome it tries to create a world where deserving individuals are rewarded for their achievements. One can argue that this last ideology has been the dominant ethos for little over a decade in Denmark at least. We see these three movements as the idea of progress translated into modern ideologies.
The relationship between secularization and progress

As we have presented in the previous section through the work of Sidney B. Fay, key historical scholars and scientific developments have carried along the idea of progress which we see as interlinked with the secularization thesis which took shape and acquired momentum from the Enlightenment period and onward. As a quick note, it is important to distinguish the thesis of secularization from the development it describes which is the decline of, at least, religious authority over the last more than 1000 years from the Middle Ages to modern day.

Today, we may see ourselves on the pinnacle of human existence, but we are also from time to time confronted with the frailty of progress and the possibility that technology might not be able to save humans from themselves. This trend which has also been termed postmodernism by prominent scholars such as Foucault, tries to capture the shift in societal sentiment among other aspects. The same trend can be discerned in the debate on secularization in which scholars are asking themselves about the inevitability and reversibility of the developments described in the secularization thesis. What has especially been an area of contestation in this debate is the role of religion in the US, and if secularization has occurred in Western societies, one can ask how come a modern
country like the US is starting to teach Creationism, the idea of a God-created Earth, in its schools, why the state of North Carolina recently became the 31st state to ban gay marriage based on religious arguments, and why 76 percent of Americans believe that God created the Earth (Pinker 2002).

Exactly this contestation has led sociologist Steve Bruce to term secularization in the following way in which he seeks to prevent ambiguity in the concept. In his clarification of secularization he points to three distinctive features to disarm any critique. First, he notes that the thesis involves the past of a particular part of the world, specifically the Western, from the days of a religiously dominated society back in the Middle Ages to the modern day society. With this statement he wishes to emphasize that secularization is not inevitable, and that it thus cannot serve as a template for how the “second” or “third” world will develop. Second, he writes that the secularization thesis is not part of any Enlightenment project, but that it on the contrary supposes that “the major changes are inadvertent and unintended consequences.” (Bruce in Fenn 2001 p. 251) Third, he emphasizes that there is no claim that modern people are too mature or too clever to believe the old superstition. This definition resembles what other scholars, such as Chavez and Dobbelaeere have also tried to formulate, namely a sort of neo-secularization theory that purges the idea of its inherent assumption of progression by removing it from the context of the Enlightenment “project”, and tries to make it more precise by
having it describe a decline in religious authority instead of an overall decline of religion. However, Bruce takes it one step further and argues that because of especially two main drivers behind secularization, namely structural differentiation and social differentiation and the resulting individualization of society, that secularization is an irreversible process.

Elaborating on these drivers, the structural differentiation points to the fragmentation of social life into specialized roles and institutions, which has exhausted power from the church as it has lost control of different social functions e.g. public administration, diplomacy, education etc. The social differentiation is the consequence of structural differentiation, where “The economic growth implicit in modernization led to an ever-greater range of occupations and life situations.” (Bruce in Fenn 2001 p. 251) This had a disrupting on influence on the previous traditional, organic communities and made them more fragmented. Later developments such as the societalization of society, as termed by Bryan Wilson (in Fenn 2001), further pushed the transformation of society and the power shift from “(...) close-knit, integrated communities (...)” to “(...) large-scale industrial and commercial enterprises, to modern states coordinated through massive, impersonal bureaucracies, and to cities.” (Bruce in Fenn 2001 p. 252)
What Bruce concludes from this development is that secularization is irreversible, since it has created a society in which people are individualized and in which traditional religions have conceded a considerable part of their organizing power. He does admit that retarding forces can occur, such as cultural defense where people in the face of a threatened social identity, may revert to a stricter adherence to religious life and norms. However, even in the face of social calamity he deems that “Without a preexisting common culture, large numbers will not interpret a disaster in the same way and hence will not respond collectively.” (Bruce in Fenn 2001 p. 262) This in turn leads him to the conclusion that “(...) unless we can imagine a reversal of the increasing cultural autonomy of the individual, secularization must be seen as irreversible.” (Bruce in Fenn 2001 p. 262)

Without going into an elaborate discussion about this, it might still be interesting to look at it from another perspective to challenge this claimed irreversibility of secularization. As noted earlier, Bruce does not assume modern people to be too mature or too clever to believe the narratives of traditional religion, but one may still discern from his perspective an underlying assumption about the inevitability of the spread of knowledge, which neglects especially two factors namely the state of education and the health situation, both of these have the potential of being forces retarding the spread of knowledge and thus secularization.
On a different note, Bruce argues that social autonomy is so deeply rooted in society that people cannot adhere to one dominant belief system as in the Middle Ages. First of all, this perspective has an assumption about the past which is about the extent of religious coherence in societies of the past, something which Bruce cannot know with certainty. Second, as Bruce also mentions, a return to religiosity seems to be influenced by cultural defense but also by impoverished and intolerable conditions. As such secularization may or may not be irreversible on a national scale. However, we argue that secularization is in fact not completely irreversible, in the sense that shared belief systems may once again flourish in specific parts of society. No inherent force transfers the knowledge of our civilization into the minds of men and each generation will have to learn anew.

Another key factor behind the secularization process, also to some extent being used in the argument of irreversibility, is Bryan Wilson’s work on how religion gradually with technological development lost its monopoly on providing salvation. As he writes, salvation was previously provided by religion as a reward for an ascetic life following the religious doctrines, but as technology progressed the increased life quality of individuals lessened the need for salvation in an afterlife. We will not as such go into whether people’s idea of the supernatural has changed, but simply argue that many health problems today have shown themselves to be a challenge even to the modern medical
science. Wilson points to the fact, that previously prayer and pious life were the only tools for getting salvation, but as more and more people face issues that the medical science cannot efficiently cure, they may revert to these methods of reaching salvation.

To sum up, we wish to provide a commentary to this short presentation of secularization. Generally we do agree with the observations put forward by the neo-secularization scholars, and in this paper we take the stand point that secularization has taken place as a decline in religious authority especially in Denmark.

Relating the secularization thesis to the idea of progress, Bruce wishes that the secularization thesis be separated from the Enlightenment “project”. We do not necessarily regard the contributions done in the Enlightenment period as an Enlightenment “project”, which Bruce terms it, and which leads to the misconception that if one is to view secularization as tied to the Enlightenment thinkers, that it thus has to be a deliberate project per se, but instead we argue that the secularization thesis has a connection to the idea of progress. Thus we argue that the Enlightenment thinkers were preoccupied with how religion was impeding societal progress, but that this was a part of an overall idea of progress and as such not the sole influence on the overall decline of religion as an institution.
The issue making this discussion complex is the distinction between the secularization thesis and the development it describes. Bruce’s point of view is that the development is not tied to any specific period but describes a gradual transformation of society caused by modernization among other things which we agree with. However, we argue that the idea of secularization cannot be separated from its progressive component. What we argue being observable is a strong, implicit faith in progress as an underlying current, which has also shaped the secularization theory, and even though scholars such as Bruce try to purge it of this meaning, we argue that in the minds of common people secularization has become a component of the idea of progress, and as such some people, and possibly Danes in particular, are regarding the decline of religion as a move towards a more civilized society. As the concept of secularization leaves the academic world and gets spread out to the masses, it may get a life of its own, become simplified to obscurity and generally align with the rest of the societal imaginary. Our claim is that this has indeed happened to secularization, and it may prove very difficult to redefine it completely.

What will be presented in the following is a Durkheimian view on religion and how it can be defined as a moral unity in society, which we think is a useful way of analyzing the distillation and individuation of traditional religion in contemporary Danish society.
The Durkheimian approach to religion

“If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.” (Emile Durkheim)

The following section of this paper will present a Durkheimian position on religion and how he sees societies inevitably generating their own forms of religious identity and symbolism, thus emphasizing the quote in the beginning that religion will be found wherever societies are to be found. Through the optics of Donald A. Nielsen’s summarizing and more contemporary work, this section will focus on Durkheim’s conceptualization of religion in order to place his theory in a more contemporary setting.

In a very simple yet effective manner, Durkheim tries to capture the essence of religion by defining it as “(…) a system of beliefs and practices that bind a community together around those things which it holds sacred.” (Nielsen in Fenn 2001 p. 120) The sacred he sees as being able to take the shape of many things including, physical objects, persons, times, place etc. The force by which these things are sacralized, Durkheim sees as an inherent part of society, the “mana” of society, that can only find expression through attachment to objects. As such this definition departs from that of his contemporaries
such as Weber and Marx, in the way it tries to both redefine religion as a broader concept and moves towards a more individual and functional analysis of religion in society. One could say that, Durkheim is interested in how religion functions or wishes to study religion on a meta-level, instead of going into the specifics of the traditional religions and their specific narratives.

As Nielsen notes, this concept adds the component of social forces to the traditional sociological focus on the institutional aspects of religion. This idea of an unbound social force in society, Nielsen compares to Foucault’s concept of power which he describes as “a productive network which runs through the whole social body”. (Nielsen in Fenn 2001 p. 121) As such Durkheim does not deny that this power is also bound to religious institutions, but does not confine it to these.

Another feature of the social force is that it is often found in oppositional forms where groups sacralize new objects otherwise disapproved by institutionally bound forces. Relating this concept to contemporary society, there are quite a lot of examples of such oppositions both directly and indirectly drawing on religious sentiment which can for instance be seen in how societies fight almost religiously over political positions and values, the grand opposition being between conservatives and liberals or liberalists and socialist in Denmark. Taken from a US context, the Occupy Wall street movement can be
seen as an example of how a group can sacralize objects such as the saying “we are the 99 percent” and can make martyrs out of victims of police brutality.

To round off the discussion on Durkheim’s conceptualization of religion, Nielsen offers a very precise evaluation of the implications of trying to redefine religion:

“If we insist on measuring religion by the full range of terms in Durkheim’s definition, many modern sacralizations are not strictly religious, but mere fragments of religious sentiment, rite, and belief; at best, protoreligions which might grow into new collective cults. However, we should not too hastily banish these manifestations of the religious impulse from Durkheim’s definitional province. It is true that all things sacred do not necessarily constitute a religion. But the sacred is a broader category than religion, a fact clear even from Durkheim’s own writings. The ambiguous qualities of the unbound sacred as a social force provide a dynamic element which “religion” alone lacks.” (Nielsen in Fenn 2001 p. 128)

What Nielsen’s quote captures is the reason why Durkheim’s perspective has been presented for this paper. We see religion as having been dispersed in especially Danish society, and as such one cannot say that these fragments create a religion of its own,
but at the same time they do constitute a piece of human nature and meaning making, which cannot be dismissed completely. What we argue, is that claiming that Danish society has left religion behind has several problematic implications. First, our society today still contains a lot of myths that we do not have any empirical evidence for believing in, but which help us navigate meaning making areas of life. Second, we are trying to push human beings along with the pace of technological development. The rationale is that we are constantly evolving alongside our technology, and in this evolution, the abandonment of religion is a natural process. In a world where we think science to be the only relevant authority, we lose parts of the social imaginary and the prosociality it may create leading to a possible loss of morality. This argument we will support with modern neuropsychological research.
The neurological perspective on religion

What we wish to do in the following is introduce very recent findings done in neuroscientific research done on both religious and non-religious people to understand the underlying brain activity involved with religious behavior thus trying to bridge together research done in the humanities with research done in the natural sciences. For this purpose we will draw extensively on the work done by the Canadian scholars Inzlicht et al. (2011) from the department of psychology at the University of Toronto. Furthermore, we will provide connections to previous mentioned theories and aspects to provide tentative explanations for the role of religion in society.

A truly interesting natural scientific method that has shown great potential for interdisciplinary studies concerning human cognition, is the continually advancing brain scanning technology also referred to as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). This potential for interdisciplinarity has been shown in its application in especially the field of psychology, where MRI scans have displayed meta-analytical capabilities by revealing the underlying brain activity behind social behavior. Such an interdisciplinarity is also the framework used by Inzlicht et al. in their work which is taking part in creating a new
cognitive science of religion - research which is tying together such diverse fields as psychology, neuroscience, cultural anthropology and archaeology. (Inzlicht et al. 2011)

As Inzlicht et al. writes, “One of the core themes of this research is that religious beliefs are a natural product of the way human minds and brains work.” (Inzlicht et al. 2011 p. 193)

Trying to understand and support this claim are three main theories about the evolutionary explanations of the existence of religious cognition in humans. These three are:

**Hyperactive agency detection** – which suggests that “(...) belief in God is a by-product of the evolutionary adaptive ability to detect agency in the external world”. (Atran; Barrett in Inzlicht 2011 p. 194) The idea is that the human brain is biased towards agency detection, thus it tries to ascribe events as being made by purposeful actors as a strategy which is used to detect potential threats. A couple of examples could be how sounds may be ascribed to potential threatening animals, or how markings may be interpreted as prints. As a consequence of this, increased survival rates may have passed on the gene. The theory is that this tendency has become overactive in some strands of human beings resulting in overactive agency detection and the idea of an omnipresent being.

**Prosociality, costly signaling, and the evolution of large groups** – the prosociality theory suggest that “(...) religion flourished because it promotes prosocial tendencies among
humans. (Norenzayan and Shariff in Inzlicht et al. 2011 p. 194) Two main strands in this theory are the social reputation line, and the costly signaling line. The former of these theories suggests that the human sensitivity to prosocial reputation, has contributed to the stability of reciprocal cooperation between groups thus making them more successful. The idea is that, “When an all-knowing God observes and punishes misdeeds, this sensitivity will foster good behavior and prosociality even between complete strangers and within very large groups.” (Inzlicht et al. 2011 p. 194) The latter strand of the prosocial theory, the costly signaling line, focuses on how groups through religion has kept freeloaders away from it, by group members adhering to “costly” rituals such as fasting, abstaining from certain foods, abstaining from sex etc. This in turn maximizes internal trust, cooperation and prosociality. (Sosis and Bressler in Inzlicht et al. 2011)

**Religion as motivated meaning-making** – This theory is the one used by Inzlicht et al. in their theoretical framework for the research. What they point out, is that even though the above theories may very well both have had their influence on the development of religious cognition, they are missing an important aspect represented by the emotional and motivational factor for religious cognition. Where both the other theories see religious cognition as a side effect of other human traits, the motivated meaning perspective sees religion as a direct cause of human’s need for meaning in their life. In their definition of the word meaning, they use the broad formulation of meaning as “(...)
the perceived coherence between beliefs, salient goals and perceptions from the environment.” (Inzlicht et al. 2011 p. 195) When this coherence exists, people will feel that the world is an orderly, controlled place that they can understand and explain.

Another motivation for meaning making is uncertainty avoidance. As it has been observed in several experiments, people react adversely and strongly to uncertainty and the unknown (Hirsh & Inzlicht; Tritt, Peterson and Inzlicht in Inzlicht et al. 2011) which makes them highly motivated to avoid such situations. Their research design thus tries to uncover how religious cognition may reduce anxiety and stress which is observed as reduction in the brain based distress signal, which is the phenomenon they try to observe in their experiments.

In their research, they test the overall hypothesis whether religious cognition is associated with decreased activity in brain areas related to distress states, for which they find a positive correlation. However from other research there has been found correlations between religiosity and anxiety, which Inzlicht et al. explain by suggesting that naturally anxious people may be attracted to religion in earlier stages of their life, and may through this religious cognition reach lower states of anxiety. To sum up, Inzlicht et al. find a linkage between religious cognition and lower activity in the brain’s error related and stress response area.
The reason why these explanations for religious cognition are interesting is that they suggest underlying neurological trends which can support the sociological discussion on religion in society. If we take a look at the first which is hyperactive agency detection, it can be related to the work of Stark and Finke, who try to refute the idea that religion is somehow related to irrationality or an abnormal psyche, as it was presented in the work of Freud among others, by presenting a body of research linking mental well-being with religious cognition. (Stark and Finke 2000) While Inzlicht et al. do conclude that religiosity does in fact minimize stress in situations of praying and possibly also prevent stressful situations occurring, there might still be a reason why this connection was argued for in the first place, which relates to the hyperactive agency detection. As noted in the above, a connection between religiosity and anxiety has been already been found. What hyperactive agency detection in an extreme form may lead to, it can be argued, is a blurred concept of reality or at least a failure to determine causation relationships. Following this argument, there may in fact turn out to be different levels of agency detection in the population leading some to a positive experience and leading others to a problematic one. In this case, it may not be the majority who has extreme cases of hyperactive agency detection but the connection may still be there, however religion cannot be said to be a product of an abnormal psyche since it would ignore the pervasiveness of this cognition.
The prosociality theory of religious cognition, likewise, can be connected to the work of Wilson on secularization and the resulting de-moralization of society. According to Wilson, the secularization of society and especially the loss of religion as a moral organizer has resulted in a number of undesirable consequences in which moral conduct and social cohesion is diminished. As he writes,

“Society ceases to be held together by shared substantive values. Its unity is no longer to be found in a widely diffused common mentalite. Instead of that kind of social cohesion, there is a more mechanical social integration, a framework of technical order, of shared procedures, and a fiscal structure of tax, debt, mortgages, insurance, and remunerative constraints.” (Wilson in Fenn 2001 p. 49)

There is however a couple of neuroscientific perspectives that might help elucidate this conclusion. First of all, as was presented in the theory of prosociality, religious cognition might have helped societies become successful through increased cooperation among other things but moreover, as it is pointed out in the social signaling model it may facilitate a framework promoting trust and collaborative cooperation. (Alcorta 2011)

However, an interesting discussion can arise from whether religion is the only thing that could create such a social consensus and social cohesion. Part of this paper’s argument
is that the ideologies part of the idea of progress namely the green movement, the socialist/humanitarian movement and liberal movement have all attempted to provide the social cohesion and consensus that religion once did. Whether they have been truly successful is of course another matter. What may in fact turn out to be the case is that they cannot promote the same kind of prosociality that traditional religion has been able to.

Concerning motivated meaning-making, we agree on it being an essential component of the human condition, and something which we tie together with the underlying idea of progress. As Inzlicht et al. mention, that in a meta-analysis of psychological stressors done by Dickerson and Kemeny it was concluded that uncertain, uncontrollable threats produced the highest stress responses in subjects. These responses even surpass the responses produced by negative stimuli, to possible become the most considerable threat to human wellbeing. As Inzlicht et al. write, “Indeed, the pursuit and maintenance of control has long been considered a key human motivation, and the perception that one can predict and steer events is an important contributor to wellbeing.” (Kelley; Langer and Rodin in Inzlicht et al. 2011p. 197)

Using this neurological perspective, we might see how the different modern ideologies might be a substitute for a meaning; however it might not protect against other types of
threats on meaning making such as being able to explain death, setbacks or the purpose of life which traditional religion does. Furthermore, it would seem that religion, a perspective which is outside the scope of this study, might have a strong influence on motivation and the social forces mentioned in Durkheim, as it may suppress critical thinking areas of the brain. A claim which might be considered at least feasible, through the observation of Inzlicht et al., that religion does in fact have anxiolytic and palliative functions.
Towards an understanding of the dispersion of religion

Drawing on the scholarly work of Robert A. White, the following section will attempt to provide an overall understanding of how and why religion and media can be studied interrelated as a way to comprehend certain contemporary cultural phenomena. This interrelated perspective is relevant for this paper because it not only tries to explain how religious sentiment has entered the realm of the media, but also how the media enables quasi-religious sentiment to be messaged to the public.

At the heart of Robert A. White’s article “Religion and Media in the construction of culture” lie the fundamental questions:

“Is religion part of the public cultural patrimony, or is it a matter of personal opinion that it best consigned to the private sphere? Does the decline of some of the institutional churches confirm predictions of inevitable secularization, or do the new religious movements signal a resurgence of the sacred in the public sphere?” (White in Hoover and Lundby 1997 p. 37)

White argues that these questions about the public role of religion calls for the dismissal of old certainties within the sociological academic field and invites a paradigm change in theories of religion, culture and media.
Entering the realm of religious studies, White sees a collapse of the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century conceptions of religion and society and finds it necessary to establish new theoretical formulations that can explain religious phenomena across different aspects of society. As White notes:

“There is a theoretical and methodological capacity to see the manifestations of religious phenomena in myriad sociopolitical contexts and in all social formations. Religious aspirations motivations are no longer seen as located largely within specific institutions and ecclesial organizations.” (White in Hoover 1997 p. 39)

Likewise, media studies have moved away from a paradigm which viewed media as only having the function of transporting information needed for industrial progress towards a paradigm consisting of many actors who are creating cultural meaning in the realm of the media and of people struggling to define their identities in the interaction with the media. (Morley in White 1997)

A central argument in White’s article, which he arrives at through Giddens’ notion of dualities, is that the sacred and the secular are two autonomous but interdependent discourses “(...) within a multiplicity of categories of meaning that interpret different modes of existence. The autonomous “symbolic realism” of the sacred... affirms an equal autonomy of the secular”. (White in Hoover 1997 p. 40) White argues that this view
opposes the modernist solution of making the secular and instrumental efficiency the rule of public discourse, instead this theory sees “(...)a continual mutual affirmation in which the sacred evokes the secular and the secular evokes the sacred”. (White in Hoover 1997 p. 40) In other words, the modernist oppositions of sacred versus secular and poetic imagination versus instrumental rationality are thus not viewed as being in opposition rather they are enabling conditions for each other.

At the core of the theory is the fundamental argument that religion and media can no longer effectively be viewed as separate spheres, but instead must be seen as overlapping entities that share some of the same spaces and purposes. One can argue that the media has adopted the role of a conveyer of meaning-making messages which formerly could be found in traditional religion as seen in many lifestyle programs as well as in advertising where especially insurance firm make use of social realistic strategies which draw on moral issues to attract the viewers.

To sum up this theory, White explains how the media are working in “sacred” space and are a site for the dialogue of the sacred and the secular in three main areas:

“(a) the search for ultimate, consistent patterns of mythic meaning and the integration of the “unexplainable” into the commonsense cultural consensus; (b) the search for perfect community and the confrontation of community with the
power structure of social practice; and (c) the search for authentic personal
identity and the resolution of the conflicts between personal and social
identities.” (White in Hoover 1997 p. 47)

As we will see in the following section, contemporary trends in commercials draw on the essential meaning-making aspect of human existence, thus invading some of the above mentioned areas of sacred space.
Commercials as a mediator

Throughout this paper we have tried to provide a meta-analytic presentation of the idea of progress as a manifestation of an underlying religious cognition intrinsic to the human mind. What we essentially claim is that faith and meaning making, not necessarily based on empirical observations, is still a part of human life today and is specifically found in the implicit faith in progress that permeates both individual life worlds and the self-image of Western society. This claim we wish to substantiate by drawing on what we see as an iconic commercial portraying the ethos of our time. More specifically we have chosen a Danish commercial which has been running in the primetime hours (of spring 2012) on the main Danish channel TV2 produced for “Dansk Landbrug og Fødevarer” (The Danish Food and Agriculture organization). It has the famous author and sports commentator Jørgen Leth as the narrator, and uses the symbols of economic crisis, industrial innovation and a “larger than life” narrative to further its message. It is estimated that an average of 2.7 million people watches TV2 on a daily basis which is around half of the population which makes it one of the most exposed commercials on TV. (The Danish Statistics Bureau)
As mentioned previously the commercial is financed by the Danish lobbying organization “Dansk Landbrug og Fødevarer” and has characteristics of a branding/awareness commercial since it does not sell a specific product, but instead uses its time to possibly conjure public support as well as trying to educate and motivate people through positive images, music and narrative. It consists of roughly 50-60 different scenes or sequences which are clipped rapidly after each other during the 65 seconds it lasts. The imagery ranges from green fields and barns over laboratories to everyday situations with people seemingly enjoying various situations such as working, studying and doing leisure activity. The background music is a light tune of whistling and the commercial takes us though the course of the day from sunrise to sunset.

The narrator begins by saying, “There is a lovely country with 4.3 million hectares of land, it is not a lot, but exactly big enough to embrace the larger questions, who are you? And who am I? Should the world be saved by ecology or high technology?” With sentence the commercial strikes a note of a larger than life theme in which big questions such as “how should the world be saved” is tied together with the personal dimension of “you” and “me” the assumption being that the world needs saving which matches the contemporary crisis perspective. This perspective of course draws on the recent economic crisis, but also on the global climate challenge. Two of the solutions offered are the use of organic farming methods and general technological developments.
These two solutions are followed by the sentence, “What significance does a sow of Danish breed have for the Danish trade balance? And can one year’s worth of cow excrement become 300 liters of heating oil or is that just bullshit?” The first of these is aimed at the Danish economic situation and the second at the global climate situation. Simultaneous with the words concerning the sow we see a plate of eggs and bacon on it followed by people in a bar watching a Danish soccer match from which a strong feeling of nationality emanates. Following this imagery a young girl is drawing a peeing cow while her father is observing. This situation portrays the sentence from the naive perspective from a child.

Along with the further narration the following imagery portrays a flash of different common people. As the commercial is rounding off we see two industrial workers at a slaughter house smiling and flirting with each other to the words, “you are you and we are the same”. Skipping to the final part we see the picture of a new born baby and its mom and we hear the narration say, “Imagine if there was a lovely country with 4.3 million hectares of land, where there was just enough room for optimism.” Ending the commercial appears a line of text saying “The future is not as dark as it has been”.

We will now proceed to a more holistic analysis of the commercial and its inter-textual context. According to Fairclough (1989) a text or message will always be situated in a
specific context. More specifically it will utilize dominant discourses present in the larger society. As such we view the commercial on two specific levels however different in reference frame. The first level is what the commercial is engineered to convey and the second is the underlying assumptions of those creators as they are part of the common societal imaginary. On the first level we can distinguish several underlying motivations represented by the imagery and narrative of the commercial. These include a harmonious atmosphere, a homogenous society with equal goals and common values, scientific achievement and solution to world problems and an overall idea that we are moving towards a better future. The pace and the seemingly missing agenda to sell anything create an interesting contrast to more traditional commercials possibly leaving a different impression. On this level one can also discern the advertising element which we will not delve deeper into, but which nonetheless glorifies the agricultural business and tries to connect it to a national sentiment.

On the second level using the time period as reference frame we can distinguish which fundamental messages the authors consider to be accepted by the majority of society as a commercial will always try to appease the viewership. Interestingly enough there is no explicit religious imagery or text however referring to Gidden’s dualities the viewer is invited to reflect on the nation’s place in the world and on his own place in the nation. Putting this commercial into recent trends in media we see it as part of a possibly
moralizing trend in commercials which include the Danish mobile phone company Callme and their campaign against foul language and more generally the increasing time given to programs focusing on lifestyle changes for example for reckless spenders (Luksusfælden), obese people and other addictions etc.

The overall mentality is readjusting in a time of crisis. However the moralizing is countered by the prevalence of the hedonistic entertainment programs popular with the youth. These opposing influences create a euphemism as the crisis is portrayed to be handled with a “work hard, play hard mentality”. We are not expected to hold back as long as we are working hard which falls in line with the capitalist mindset. Moreover the crisis becomes the embodiment of temporary setbacks which can be overcome by progress. The fall of the Western economic system is thus attempted eliminated through technological innovation and the rekindling of the idea of progress.
Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to uncover what we think to be one of the most fundamental and implicit beliefs of modern Western society, namely the idea of progress. This has naturally led to a historical tracing of its origin, its gradual expansion into the realms of technological, social and evolutionary progress, its relation to religious sentiment and secularization, and finally as it is expressed in modern Danish media.

Concerning the historical development of the idea, we have tried to illustrate what we consider to be a significant transformation from the ancient Greek cyclical worldview to the linear idea of progress as seen from the Enlightenment period and onwards. This change represents a significant shift in mentality since it has major implications for both the aspirations of the individual, but also of society as a whole. Tracing the further development, we see how the idea through the innovations of especially Comté and Darwin’s scholarly contributions was expanded from the technological realm to the realms of social organization and biological evolution. We see this as a key development since there exists a significant tension between the nature of technological progress versus social and evolutionary progress. The expectation that the biological and
behavioral progress of man is able to follow the development of technology represents a significant paradox which we think is still present in modern day society.

In regards to the secularization perspective, we see a clear connection between it and the aforementioned social progress as started by Comté. What the secularization thesis and the sociological school is focused on is the structural developments of society with the implicit idea that we can and should change it for the better. We see this component of progress as inherent in the secularization thesis even though some modern scholars wish to diminish this connection. Although, they may be right in the observation that religious authority has declined with the change in societal structure, we do not think that the connotation of the secularization thesis can be changed that easily. Supporting their argument, neuroscientific research suggests that the people not believing in traditional religion might not get the same palliative effect otherwise linked to religious cognition. However, whether secularization is irreversible we claim is debatable since unhinging secularization from social progress undermines Bruce’s assumption of “stable, affluent Western democracies” in the sense that it opens up to the possibility of social progress reversing. Putting it on the tip, one can question whether America is still a democracy, who exactly is affluent and whether the situation is stable. Returning to the neuroscientific research, we suggest that the idea of progress
satisfies one of the most basic human needs which is the need for making meaning of the world to avoid stress and uncertainty.

With the Durkheimian perspective we have introduced a way to re-conceptualize religion in modern day society. Our wish is to illustrate the quasi-religious component of the idea of progress which we see as being manifested through at least three dominant ideologies in the West, namely the “green” movement, the “Marxist/socialist” movement and the “liberal” movement. What we argue is that these ideologies have taken over some of the moralizing and organizing aspects of traditional religion in a Danish setting. This adoption of functions we see present in the media as they draw on the discourse of morality, cooperation and progress. To exemplify this we have analyzed a commercial, which uses these narratives as a way to induce goodwill and hope in its viewership along with positive sentiment towards the advertised organization. We argue that this commercial is part of an overall trend in the media that offers guiding and meaning making programs which address the situation of crisis and offer solutions to this.

To put things in perspective, if you ask a person today whether we have more or less people enslaved either by working conditions or sexual trafficking their possible belief in progress will urge them to say less. However, according to estimates, the reality is that
we have more slaves in the world today than ever before. The same point can be made about many other aspects of society which we intuitively believe to have progressed. An inherent limitation of the human mind is the limited volume of information it can store, thus forcing us to believe in things which we may not have seen any empirical evidence for, which is why scientific knowledge and faith will always we intertwined on the individual level. Thus we can claim to be free of religion, but we are bound to mythical beliefs about certain aspects of ourselves, society and the world we live in. One such myth is the idea of progress.
Reference list


The Danish Food and Agriculture Commercial, [accessed on 31-05-2012], http://youtu.be/N29HkUKdS