

Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective

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Over a decade ago, I suggested that in order to speak meaningfully of “secularization,” we needed to distinguish between three different connotations:

- a) Secularization as the *decline of religious beliefs and practices* in modern societies, often postulated as a universal, human, developmental process. This is the most recent but by now the most widespread usage of the term in contemporary academic debates on secularization, although it remains unregistered in most dictionaries of most European languages.
- b) Secularization as the *privatization of religion*, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics.¹
- c) Secularization as the *differentiation of the secular spheres* (state, economy, science), usually understood as “emancipation” from religious institutions and norms. This is the core component of the classic theories of secularization, which is related to the original etymological-historical meaning of the term within medieval Christendom. As indicated by every dictionary of every Western European language, it refers to the

¹ My book, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), put into question the empirical as well as the normative validity of the privatization thesis.

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transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc., from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use, possession, or control.²

Maintaining this analytical distinction, I argued, should allow for the examination of the validity of the three propositions independently of each other and thus refocus the often fruitless secularization debate into comparative historical analysis that could account for different patterns of secularization, in all three meanings of the term, across societies and civilizations. Yet the debate between European and American sociologists of religion remains unabated. For the European defenders of the traditional theory, the secularization of Western European societies appears as an empirically irrefutable *fait accompli*.³ But Europeans tend to switch back and forth between the traditional meaning of secularization and the more recent meaning that points to the progressive, and, since the 1960s, drastic and assumedly irreversible decline of religious beliefs and practices among the European population. European sociologists tend to view the two meanings of the term as intrinsically related because they view the two realities—the decline in the societal power and significance of religious institutions, and the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals—as structurally related components of general processes of modernization.

American sociologists of religion tend to restrict the use of the term secularization to its narrower, more recent meaning of the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals. It is not so much that they question the secularization of society, but simply that they take it for granted as an unremarkable fact. The United States, they assume, was already born as a modern secular society. Yet they see no evidence of a progressive decline in the religious beliefs and practices of the American people. If anything, the historical evidence points in the opposite direction of progressive *churching* of the American population since independence.⁴ Consequently, many American sociologists of religion tend to discard the theory of secularization, or at least its postulate of the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, as a European myth, once they are able to show that in the United States none of the usual “indicators” of secularization, such as church attendance, frequency of prayer, belief in God, etc., evince any long-term declining trend.⁵

² “Secularization,” *The International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Elsevier, 2001) 13,786–91.

³ Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

⁴ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Andrew M. Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁵ Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60.3 (1999): 249–73; Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

The new American paradigm has turned the European model of secularization on its head.⁶ In the extreme “supply-side” version of the rational choice theory of religious markets, American sociologists use the American evidence to postulate a general structural relationship between disestablishment or state deregulation, open and free competitive and pluralistic religious markets, and high levels of individual religiosity. What was until now the American exception attains normative status, while the previous European rule is now demoted to being a deviation from the American norm. The low levels of religiosity in Europe are now supposedly explained by the persistence of either the religious establishment or highly regulated monopolistic or oligopolistic religious markets.⁷ But the internal comparative evidence within Europe does not support the basic tenets of the American theory. Monopolistic situations in Poland and Ireland are linked to persistently high levels of religiosity, while increasing liberalization and state deregulation elsewhere are often accompanied by persistent rates of religious decline.⁸

An impasse has been reached in the debate. The traditional theory of secularization works relatively well for Europe, but not for the United States. The American paradigm works relatively well for the U.S., but not for Europe. Neither can offer a plausible account of the internal variations within Europe. Most importantly, neither works very well for other world religions and other parts of the world. Thus, in order to overcome the impasse and surmount the fruitless debate, one needs to make clear the terminological and theoretical disagreements. But most importantly, one needs to historicize and contextualize all categories, refocus the attention beyond Europe and North America, and adopt a more global perspective.⁹

An impasse has been reached in the debate.

While the decline and privatization sub-theses have undergone numerous critiques and revisions in the last fifteen years, the understanding of secularization as a single process of functional differentiation of the various institutional spheres or sub-systems of modern societies remains relatively uncontested in the social sciences, particularly within European sociology. Yet one should ask whether it is appropriate to subsume the multiple and diverse historical patterns of differentiation and fusion of the various

⁶ R. Stephen Warner, “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98.5 (1993): 1,044–93.

⁷ Theodore Caplow, “Contrasting Trends in European and American Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 46.2 (1985): 101–8; Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side Interpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994): 230–52; Roger Finke, “The Consequences of Religious Competition: Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change,” *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment*, ed. L. A. Young (New York: Routledge, 1997) 45–65.

⁸ Steve Bruce, “The Supply-Side Model of Religion: The Nordic and Baltic States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39.1 (2000): 32–46.

⁹ José Casanova, “Beyond European and American Exceptionalisms: Towards a Global Perspective,” *Predicting Religion*, ed. Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 17–29.

institutional spheres (that is, church and state, state and economy, economy and science) that one finds throughout the history of modern Western societies into a single teleological process of modern functional differentiation.

One should further ask the extent to which it is possible to dissociate the analytical reconstructions of the historical processes of differentiation of Western European societies from general theories of modernity that postulate secular differentiation as a normative project or global requirement for all “modern” societies. In other words, can the theory of secularization as a particular theory of European historical developments be dissociated from general theories of global modernization? Can there be a non-Western, non-secular modernity or are the self-definitions of modernity inevitably tautological insofar as secular differentiation is precisely what defines a society as “modern”?

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I fully agree with Talal Asad that the secular “should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of ‘religion’ and thus achieves the latter’s relocation.”¹⁰ In the historical processes of European secularization, the religious and the secular are inextricably bound together and mutually condition each other. Asad has shown how “the historical

process of secularization effects a remarkable ideological inversion.... For at one time ‘the secular’ was a part of a theological discourse [*saeculum*],” while later “the religious” is constituted by secular political and scientific discourses, so that “religion” itself as a historical category and as a universal globalized concept emerges as a construction of Western secular modernity.¹¹

But Asad’s own genealogy of the secular is too indebted to the self-genealogies of secularism he has so aptly exposed, and fails to recognize the extent to which the formation of the secular is itself inextricably linked with the internal transformations of European Christianity, from the so-called Papal Revolution to the Protestant Reformation, and from the ascetic and pietistic sects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the emergence of evangelical, denominational Protestantism in nineteenth-century America. Should one define these transformations as a process of internal secularization of Western Christianity, or as the cunning of secular reason, or both? A proper rethinking of secularization will require a critical examination of the diverse patterns of differentiation and fusion of the religious and the secular and their mutual constitution across all world religions.

¹⁰ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) 191.

¹¹ Asad 192; see also Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

The contextualization of categories should begin with the recognition of the particular Christian historicity of Western European developments, as well as of the multiple and diverse historical patterns of secularization and differentiation within European and Western societies. Such a recognition in turn should allow a less Euro-centric comparative analysis of patterns of differentiation and secularization in other civilizations and world religions, and more importantly the further recognition that with the world-historical process of globalization initiated by the European colonial expansion, all these processes everywhere are dynamically interrelated and mutually constituted.

Multiple Differentiations, Secularizations, and Modernities

There are multiple and diverse secularizations in the West and multiple and diverse Western modernities, and they are still mostly associated with fundamental historical differences between Catholic, Protestant, and Byzantine Christianity, and between Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism. As David Martin showed, in the Latin-Catholic cultural area, and to some extent throughout Continental Europe, there was a collision between religion and the differentiated secular spheres—that is, between Catholic Christianity and modern science, modern capitalism, and the modern state.¹² As a result of this protracted clash, the Enlightenment critique of religion found here ample resonance; the secularist genealogy of modernity was constructed as a triumphant emancipation of reason, freedom, and worldly pursuits from the constraints of religion; and practically every “progressive” European social movement from the time of the French Revolution to the present was informed by secularism. The secularist self-narratives, which have informed functionalist theories of differentiation and secularization, have envisioned this process as the emancipation and expansion of the secular spheres at the expense of a much diminished and confined, though also newly differentiated, religious sphere. The boundaries are well kept; only they are relocated, drastically pushing religion into the margins and into the private sphere.

In the Anglo-Protestant cultural area, by contrast, and particularly in the United States, there was “collusion” between religion and the secular differentiated spheres. There is little historical evidence of any tension between American Protestantism and capitalism and very little manifest tension between science and religion in the U.S. prior to the Darwinian crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. The American Enlightenment had hardly any anti-religious component. Even “the separation of church and state” that was constitutionally codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment, had as much the purpose of protecting “the free exercise” of religion from state interference as that of protecting the federal state from any religious entanglement. It is rare, at least until very recently, to find any “progressive” social movement in America appealing to

¹² David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

“secularist” values; appeals to the Gospel and to “Christian” values are certainly much more common throughout the history of American social movements, as well as in the discourse of American presidents.

The purpose of this comparison is not to reiterate the well-known fact that American society is more “religious” and therefore less “secular” than European societies. While the first may be true, the second proposition does not follow. On the contrary, the United States has always been the paradigmatic form of a modern secular, differentiated society. Yet the triumph of “the secular” came aided by religion rather than at its expense, and the boundaries themselves became so diffused that, at least by European ecclesiastical standards, it is not clear where the secular ends and religion begins. As Tocqueville observed, “not only do the Americans practice their religion out of self-interest, but they often even place in this world the interest which they have in practicing it.”¹³ Yet it would be ludicrous to argue that the United States is a less functionally differentiated society, and therefore less modern, and therefore less secular, than France or Sweden. On the contrary, one could argue that there is less functional differentiation of state, economy, science, etc., in *étatiste* France than in the United States, but this does not make France either less modern or less secular than the United States.

When American sociologists of religion retort from their provincial perspective that secularization is a European myth, they are right if only in the sense that the United States was born as a modern secular state, never knew the established church of the European caesaro-papist absolutist state, and did not need to go through a European process of secular differentiation in order to become a modern secular society. If the European concept of secularization is not a particularly relevant category for the “Christian” United States, much less may it be directly applicable to other axial civilizations with very different modes of structuration of the religious and the secular. As an analytical conceptualization of a historical process, secularization is a category that makes sense within the context of the particular internal and external dynamics of the transformation of Western European Christianity from the Middle Ages to the present. But the category becomes problematic once it is generalized as a universal process of societal development and once it is transferred to other world religions and other civilizational areas with very different dynamics of structuration of the relations and tensions between religion and world, or between cosmological transcendence and worldly immanence.

The category of secularization could hardly be applicable, for instance, to such “religions” as Confucianism or Taoism, insofar as they are not characterized by high tension with “the world,” insofar as their model of transcendence can hardly be called “religious,” and insofar as they have no ecclesiastical organization. In a sense, those religions that have always been “worldly” and “lay” do not need to undergo a process of secular-

¹³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 284.

ization. To secularize—that is, “to make worldly” or “to transfer from ecclesiastical to civil use”—is a process that does not make much sense in such a civilizational context. In this respect, China and the Confucian civilizational area have been “secular” *avant la lettre*. It is the postulated intrinsic correlation between modernization and secularization that is highly problematic. There can be modern societies like the U.S., which are secular while deeply religious, and there can be pre-modern societies like China, which from our Euro-centric religious perspective look deeply secular and irreligious.¹⁴

It just happened that the particular, specifically Christian, Western European dynamic of secularization became globalized with the expansion of European colonialism, and with the ensuing global expansion of capitalism, of the European system of states, of modern science, and of modern ideologies of secularism. Thus, the relevant questions become how Confucianism, Taoism, and other world religions respond to the global expansion of “Western secular modernity,” and how all the religious traditions are reinterpreted as a response to this global challenge.

The concept of multiple modernities, first developed by S. N. Eisenstadt, is a more adequate conceptualization and pragmatic vision of modern global trends than either secular cosmopolitanism or the clash of civilizations. In a certain sense, it shares elements from both. Like cosmopolitanism, the concept of multiple modernities maintains that there are some common elements or traits shared by all “modern” societies that help to distinguish them from their “traditional” or pre-modern forms. But these modern traits or principles attain multiple forms and diverse institutionalizations. Moreover, many of these institutionalizations are continuous or congruent with the traditional historical civilizations. Thus, there is both a civilization of modernity and the continuous transformation of the pre-modern historical civilizations under modern conditions, which help to shape the multiple modernities.

Most of the modern traits may have emerged first in the West, but even there one finds multiple modernities. Naturally, this multiplicity becomes even more pronounced as non-Western societies and civilizations acquire and institutionalize those modern traits. Modern traits, moreover, are not developed necessarily in contradistinction to or even at the expense of tradition, but rather through the transformation and the pragmatic adjustment of tradition. In this respect, the multiple modernities position shares with the clash of civilizations position the emphasis on the relevance of cultural traditions and world religions for the formation of multiple modernities.

¹⁴ Indeed, in the same way as the U.S. appears as an “outlier” or deviant case among advanced post-industrial societies, similarly China appears as an outlier among agrarian societies. Actually, China evinces the lowest level of religious beliefs and religious participation of any country in the world, challenging the assumed correlation between insecurity/survival values and religious beliefs and participation. On the Norris/Inglehart scale, agrarian China—at least its Confucian elites—would have appeared for centuries as a highly secular-rational society. See Figures 10.1 and 10.2 in Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 224–6.

Secular cosmopolitanism is still based on a rigid dichotomous contraposition of sacred tradition and secular modernity, assuming that the more of one, the less of the other. The clash of civilizations perspective, by contrast, emphasizes the essential continuity between tradition and modernity. Western modernity is assumed to be continuous with the Western tradition. As other civilizations modernize, becoming ever more like the West, they will also maintain an essential continuity with their respective traditions—thus, the inevitable clash of civilizations as all modern societies basically continue their diverse and mostly incommensurable traditions.

The multiple modernities position rejects both the notion of a modern radical break with traditions as well as the notion of an essential modern continuity with tradition. All traditions and civilizations are radically transformed in the processes of modernization, but they also have the possibility of shaping in particular ways the institutionalization of modern traits. Traditions are forced to respond and adjust to modern conditions, but in the process of reformulating their traditions for modern contexts, they also help to shape the particular forms of modernity.

Decline, Revival, or Transformation of Religion?

The progressive decline of institutional Christian religion in Europe is an undeniable social fact. Since the 1960s an increasing majority of the European population has ceased participating in traditional religious practice on a regular basis, while still maintaining relatively high levels of private individual religious beliefs. Grace Davie has characterized this general European situation as “believing without belonging.”¹⁵ At the same time, however, large numbers of Europeans, even in the most secular countries, still identify themselves as “Christian,” pointing to an implicit, diffused, and submerged Christian cultural identity. Danièle Hervieu-Léger has offered the reverse characterization of the European situation as “belonging without believing.”¹⁶ From France to Sweden and from England to Scotland, the historical churches (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, or Calvinist), although emptied of active membership, still function, vicariously as it were, as public carriers of the national religion. In this respect, “secular” and “Christian” cultural identities are intertwined in complex and rarely verbalized modes among most Europeans.

Yet traditional explanations of European secularization by reference to either increasing institutional differentiation, increasing rationality, or increasing individualism are not persuasive since other modern societies, like the United States, do not manifest similar levels of religious decline. Once the exceptional character of European religious developments is

¹⁵ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); and *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “Religion und Sozialer Zusammenhalt in Europa,” *Transit: Europäische Revue* 26 (Summer 2004): 101–19.

recognized, it becomes necessary to search for an explanation not in general processes of modernization but rather in particular European historical developments. Indeed, the most interesting issue sociologically is not the fact of progressive religious decline among the European population since the 1950s, but the fact that this decline is interpreted through the lenses of the secularization paradigm and is therefore accompanied by a “secularist” self-understanding that interprets the decline as “normal” and “progressive”—that is, as a quasi-normative consequence of being a “modern” and “enlightened” European. The secularization of Western European societies can be explained better in terms of the triumph of the knowledge regime of secularism, than in terms of structural processes of socio-economic development. The internal variations within Europe, moreover, can be explained better in terms of historical patterns of church-state and church-nation relations, as well as in terms of different paths of secularization among the different branches of Christianity, than in terms of levels of modernization.

It is the tendency to link processes of secularization to processes of modernization, rather than to the patterns of fusion and dissolution of religious, political, and societal communities—that is, of churches, states, and nations—that is at the root of our impasse at the secularization debate. Following Weber we should distinguish analytically the community cult and salvation religious communities.¹⁷ Not every salvation religion functions as a community cult—that is, is co-extensive with a territorial political community or plays the Durkheimian function of societal integration. One may think of the many denominations, sects, or cults in America that function primarily as religions of individual salvation. Nor does every community cult function as a religion of individual salvation offering the individual *qua* individual salvation from sickness, poverty, and all sorts of distress and danger—one may think of state Confucianism in China, Shintoism in Japan, or most caesaro-papist imperial cults. Lesser forms of “folk” religion tend to supply individual healing and salvation.

The Christian *church* and the Muslim *umma* are two particular though very different forms of historical fusion of community cults and religions of individual salvation. The truly puzzling question in Europe, and the explanatory key in accounting for the exceptional character of European secularization, is why national churches, once they ceded to the secular nation-state their traditional historical function as community cults—that is, as collective representations of the imagined national communities and carriers of the collective memory—also lost in the process their ability to function as religions of individual salvation. Crucial is the question of why individuals in Europe, once they lose faith in their national churches, do not bother to look for alternative

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¹⁷ Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of the World Religion,” *From Max Weber*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 272.

salvation religions. In a certain sense, the answer lies in the fact that Europeans continue to be implicit members of their national churches, even after explicitly abandoning them. The national churches remain there as a public good to which they have rightful access when it comes time to celebrate the transcendent rites of passage, birth, and death. It is this peculiar situation that explains the lack of demand and the absence of a truly competitive religious market in Europe.

In contrast, the particular pattern of separation of church and state codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment served to structure the unique pattern of American religious pluralism. The United States never had a national church. Eventually, all religions in America, churches as well as sects, irrespective of their origins, doctrinal claims, and ecclesiastical identities, turned into “denominations,” formally equal under the constitution and competing in a relatively free, pluralistic, and voluntaristic religious market. As the organizational form and principle of such a religious system, denominationalism constitutes the great American religious invention.¹⁸ Along with, yet differentiated from, each and all denominations, the American civil religion functions as the community cult of the nation.

At first, the diversity and substantial equality was only institutionalized as internal denominational religious pluralism within American Protestantism. America was defined as a “Christian” nation and “Christian” meant solely “Protestant.” But eventually, after prolonged outbursts of Protestant nativism directed primarily at Catholic immigrants, the pattern allowed for the incorporation of religious others, Catholics and Jews, into the system of American religious pluralism. A process of dual accommodation took place whereby Catholicism and Judaism became American religions, while American religion and the nation were equally transformed in the process. America became a “Judeo-Christian” nation, and Protestant, Catholic, and Jew became the three denominations of the American civil religion.

The fact that religion, religious institutions, and religious identities played a central role in the process of incorporating European immigrants has been amply documented and forms the core of Will Herberg’s well-known thesis.¹⁹ Herberg’s claim that immigrants became more religious as they became more American has been restated by most contemporary studies of immigrant religions in America.²⁰ It is important to realize, therefore, that immigrant religiosity is not simply a traditional residue, an Old World

¹⁸ Sydney E. Mead, “Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America,” *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Andrew M. Greeley, *The Denominational Society: A Sociological Approach to Religion in America* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1972).

¹⁹ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960).

²⁰ See José Casanova, “Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism: A EU/US Comparison,” *The New Religious Pluralism and Democracy*, ed. Thomas Banchoff (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

survival likely to disappear with adaptation to the new context, but rather an adaptive response to the New World. The thesis implies not only that immigrants tend to be religious because of a certain social pressure to conform to American religious norms, something that is undoubtedly the case, but more importantly, that collective religious identities have always been one of the primary ways of structuring internal societal pluralism in American history.²¹ In my view, the thesis also offers a more plausible explanation of American religious vitality than rational choice supply-side theories of competitive religious markets.

There is a sense in which both European secular developments and American religious developments are rather unique and exceptional. In this respect, one could certainly talk, as Europeans have done for decades, of “American exceptionalism,” or one could talk, as it has become fashionable today, of “European exceptionalism.” But both characterizations are highly problematic, if it is implied, as it was in the past, that America was the exception to the European rule of secularization, or if it is implied, as it often is today, that secular Europe is the exception to some global trend of religious revival.²² When it comes to religion, there is no global rule. All world religions are being transformed radically today, as they were throughout the era of European colonial expansion, by processes of modernization and globalization. But they are being transformed in diverse and manifold ways.

When it comes to religion, there is no global rule.

All world religions are forced to respond to the global expansion of modernity as well as to their mutual and reciprocal challenges, as they all undergo multiple processes of *aggiornamento* and come to compete with one another in the emerging global system of religions. Under conditions of globalization, world religions do not only draw upon their own traditions but also increasingly upon one another. Inter-civilizational encounters, cultural imitations and borrowings, diasporic diffusions, hybridity, creolization, and transcultural hyphenations are all part and parcel of the global present.

Sociologists of religion should be less obsessed with the decline of religion and more attuned to the new forms that religion is assuming in all world religions at three different levels of analysis: the individual level, the group level, and the societal level. In a certain sense, Ernst Troeltsch’s three types of religion—“individual mysticism,” “sect,” and “church”—correspond to these three levels of analysis.²³ At the individual level the

²¹ Racialization has been the other primary way of structuring internal societal pluralism in American history. Not religion alone, as Herberg’s study would seem to imply, and not race alone, as contemporary immigration studies would seem to imply, but religion and race and their complex entanglements have served to structure the American experience of immigrant incorporation—indeed, they are the keys to “American exceptionalism.”

²² Grace Davie, “Europe: The Exception that Proves the Rule?” *The Desecularization of the World*, ed. Peter Berger (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

²³ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (New York: MacMillan, 1931).

predictions of Troeltsch and William James at the beginning of the last century concerning individual mysticism have held well.²⁴ What Thomas Luckmann called “invisible religion” in the 1960s remains the dominant form of individual religion and is likely to gain increasing global prominence.²⁵ The modern individual is condemned to pick and choose from a wide arrangement of meaning systems. From a Western monotheistic perspective, such a condition of polytheistic and polyformic individual freedom

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may seem a highly novel or postmodern one. But from a non-Western perspective, particularly that of the Asian pantheist religious traditions, the condition looks much more like the old state of affairs. Individual mysticism has always been an important option, at least for elites and religious virtuosi, within the Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions.

What Inglehart calls the expansion of post-materialist spiritual values can be understood in this respect as the generalization and democratization of options until now only available to elites and religious virtuosi in most religious traditions. As the privileged material conditions available to the elites for millennia are generalized to entire populations, so are the spiritual and religious options that were usually reserved for them. I would not characterize such a process, however, as religious decline. But what is certainly new in our global age is the simultaneous presence and availability of all world religions and all cultural systems, from the most “primitive” to the most “modern,” often detached from their temporal and spatial contexts, ready for flexible or fundamentalist individual appropriation.

At the level of religious communities, much of sociology has lamented the loss of *Gemeinschaft* as one of the negative consequences of modernity. Both individualism and societalization are supposed to expand at the expense of community. Theories of modernization are predicated on the simple dichotomies of tradition and modernity, and of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Most theories of secularization are based on the same simple dichotomies and ultimately on the premise that in the long run processes of modern societal rationalization make community inviable. But the fact is that modernity, as Tocqueville saw clearly, offers new and expanded possibilities for the construction of communities of all kinds as voluntary associations, and particularly for the construction of new religious communities as voluntary congregations. The sect is, of course, the paradigmatic type of a voluntary religious congregation. But in the traditional theory, the sect lives in a high and ultimately unsustainable tension with the larger society. American denominationalism, by contrast, can be understood as the generalization and relaxation of the sectarian principle of voluntary religious association.

²⁴ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁵ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

Most of the so-called “cults,” “new religions,” or “new religious movements” assume the form of voluntary congregations, but so do the most dynamic forms of Christianity, like the Christian base communities in Latin America or the Pentecostal churches throughout the world, or the most dynamic forms of Islam—such as Tablighi Jamaat, a form of evangelical Islam akin to early nineteenth-century American Methodism—and the many forms of Sufi brotherhoods. Even world religions, like Hinduism or Buddhism, that have a less developed tradition of congregationalism, are emerging as prominent new institutional forms, particularly in the immigrant diasporas. This institutional transformation in the immigrant diasporas is in turn affecting profoundly the religious institutional forms in the civilizational home areas.

At the societal level of what could be called “imagined religious communities,” secular nationalism and national “civil religions” will continue to be prominent carriers of collective identities, but ongoing processes of globalization are likely to enhance the re-emergence of the great “world religions” as globalized transnational imagined religious communities. While new cosmopolitan and transnational imagined communities will emerge, the most relevant ones are likely to be once again the old civilizations and world religions. Therein lies the merit of Samuel Huntington’s thesis.²⁶ But his geo-political conception of civilizations as territorial units akin to nation-states and superpowers is problematic, leading him to anticipate future global conflicts along civilizational fault lines. In fact, globalization represents not only a great opportunity for the old world religions insofar as they can free themselves from the territorial constraints of the nation-state and regain their transnational dimensions, but also a great threat insofar as globalization entails the de-territorialization of all cultural systems and threatens to dissolve the essential bonds between histories, peoples, and territories that have defined all civilizations and world religions.

Religious Privatization, Religious De-Privatization, or Both?

It is unlikely that either modern authoritarian regimes or modern liberal democratic systems will prove ultimately successful in banishing religion to the private sphere. Authoritarian regimes may be temporarily successful through repressive measures in enforcing the privatization of religion. Democratic regimes, by contrast, are likely to have greater difficulty in doing so, other than through the tyranny of a secular majority over religious minorities. As the case of France shows, *laïcité* can indeed become a constitutionally sacralized principle, consensually shared by the overwhelming majority of citizens, who support the enforcement of legislation banishing “ostensible religious symbols” from the public sphere because they are viewed as a threat to the national system or the national tradition. Obviously, the opposite is the case in the United

²⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

States, where secular minorities may feel threatened by Judeo-Christian definitions of the national republic.

I cannot find a compelling reason, on either democratic or liberal grounds, to banish in principle religion from the public democratic sphere. One could at most, on pragmatic historical grounds, defend the need for separation between “church” and “state,” although I am no longer convinced that complete separation is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for democracy. The attempt to establish a wall of separation between “religion” and “politics” is both unjustified and probably counterproductive for democracy itself. Curtailing the “free exercise of religion” *per se* must lead to curtailing the free exercise of the civil and political rights of religious citizens and will ultimately infringe on the vitality of a democratic civil society. Particular religious discourses or particular religious practices may be objectionable and susceptible to legal prohibition on some democratic or liberal ground, but not because they are “religious” *per se*.

Tocqueville was perhaps the only modern social theorist who was able to elaborate these issues with relative clarity and freed from secularist prejudices. He questioned the two central premises of the Enlightenment critique of religion, namely that the advancement of education and reason and the advancement of democratic freedoms would

make religion politically irrelevant. He anticipated, rather presciently, that the democratization of politics and the entrance of ordinary people into the political arena would augment, rather than diminish, the public relevance of religion. He found empirical confirmation in the democratic experience of the United States, at the time the most democratic of modern societies and the one with the highest levels of literacy.²⁷

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The history of democratic politics throughout the world has confirmed Tocqueville’s assumptions. Religious issues, religious resources, interdenominational conflicts, and secular-religious cleavages have

all been relatively central to electoral democratic politics and to the politics of civil society throughout the history of democracy. Even in secular Europe, where a majority of the political elites and of ordinary citizens had taken the thesis of privatization for granted, unexpectedly, contentious religious issues have returned again to the center of European politics.²⁸ It is not surprising therefore that this should be even more the

²⁷ The fact that Tocqueville uses the subterfuge of discussing the problems of black slavery and the genocide of the Native American in a separate chapter at the end of Book I because “they are outside democracy” shows the extent to which Tocqueville was at least implicitly aware that America was a “racial” democracy, for whites only, and therefore far from being a model democracy.

²⁸ José Casanova, “Religion, Secular Identities, and European Integration,” *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, ed. Timothy Byrnes and Peter Katzenstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

case in the United States, where historically religion has always been at the very center of all great political conflicts and movements of social reform. From independence to abolition, from nativism to women's suffrage, from prohibition to the civil rights movement, religion has always been at the center of these conflicts, but also on both sides of the political barricades. What is new in the last decades is the fact that for the first time in American political history, the contemporary culture wars are beginning to resemble the secular-religious cleavages that were endemic to continental European politics in the past. Religion itself has now become a contentious public issue.

If today I had to revise anything from my earlier work, it would be my attempt to restrict, on what I thought were justifiable normative grounds, public religion to the public sphere of civil society. This remains my own personal normative and political preference, but I am not certain that the secular separation of religion from political society or even from the state are universalizable maxims, in the sense that they are either necessary or sufficient conditions for democratic politics. As the example of so many modern secular authoritarian and totalitarian states show, from the Soviet Union to secular Turkey, strict no establishment is by no means a sufficient condition for democracy. On the other hand, several countries with at least nominal establishment, such as England or Lutheran Scandinavian countries, have a relatively commendable record of democratic freedoms and of protection of the rights of minorities, including religious ones. It would seem, therefore, that strict separation is also not a necessary condition for democracy. Indeed one could advance the proposition that of the two clauses of the First Amendment, "free exercise" is the one that stands out as a normative democratic principle in itself, while the no-establishment principle is defensible only insofar as it might be a necessary means to free exercise and to equal rights. In other words, secularist principles *per se* may be defensible on some other ground, but not as intrinsically liberal democratic ones.

The rules for protection from the tyranny of religious majorities should be the same democratic rules used to defend from the tyranny of any democratic majority.

The rules for protection from the tyranny of religious majorities should be the same democratic rules used to defend from the tyranny of any democratic majority. The protection of the rights of any minority, religious or secular, and equal universal access should be central normative principles of any liberal democratic system. In principle one should not need any additional particular secularist principle or legislation. But as a matter of fact, historically and pragmatically, it may be necessary to disestablish "churches"—that is, ecclesiastical institutions that claim either monopolistic rights over a territory or particular privileges, or it may be necessary to use constitutional and at times extraordinary means to disempower entrenched tyrannical majorities.

Finally, on empirical grounds there are good reasons why we should expect religion and morality to remain and even to become ever more contentious public issues in democratic politics. Given such trends as increasing globalization, transnational migrations, increasing multiculturalism, the biogenetic revolution, and the persistence of blatant gender discrimination, the number of contentious public religious issues is likely to grow rather than diminish. The result is a continuous expansion of the *res publica* while the citizen's republic becomes ever more diverse and fragmented. The penetration of all spheres of life, including the most private, by public policy; the expansion of scientific-technological frontiers giving humanity Demiurgic powers of self-creation and self-destruction; the compression of the whole world into one single common home for all of humanity; and the moral pluralism that seems inherent to multiculturalism—all these transcendent issues will continue to engage religion and provoke religious responses.