



The Big Religion Questions Finally Solved

Gregory S. Paul

Advanced sociological research has determined that dysfunctional socioeconomic factors are responsible for the origin and historical popularity of religious faith and that science, secure prosperity, and consumerism are radically undermining faith all across the first world. Contrary to naysayers, the so-called secularization hypothesis (which predicts that social and scientific advances will drive a gradual abandonment of faith) is

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being borne out across the developed world. In this essay, I will summarize an enormous range of recent research. Space does not permit providing source information for every finding; readers inclined to explore further are directed to the Further Reading list at the end of this article.

NEEDED: A NEW SYNTHESIS

In an essay on the *Edge* Web site, Alan Alda asked the question that has long vexed fellow rationalists: “[Why] is belief in God and Gods so ubiquitous?” He joined many others in speculating that faith is a gene-based adaptation that somehow improves reproductive success. Fear of death is another oft-proposed cause. Richard Dawkins proposed that religious “memes” act as viral agents that infect entire populations.

The problem of religion and its frequent consort, creationism, has seemed so mysterious and insoluble that whole books have been written about it, including Daniel C. Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*, whose title implies that theological supernaturalism has insinuated itself so deeply into the human psyche that it must be purposely smashed. The pro-theistic Templeton Foundation has joined with Oxford University in a multimillion dollar project to determine scientifically why people believe in God.* Conversely, in his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins can find no explanation for why his native England (indeed, most of the first world) has lost the faith. Meanwhile, the theory that America’s free market in faith explains why religion and even creationism remain strong in this country still commands wide assent—outside the sociological community. In a 2002 FREE INQUIRY article documenting the implosion of Western faith, this researcher surveyed a number of factors that might drive levels of popular religiosity, without coming to any definite conclusions.**

In this article, I *will* draw those conclusions.

It has yet to percolate outside the sphere of specialists the great strides social sciences have made in understanding religion as a human phenomenon. During just the last few years,

*“Scientific Study into Religious Belief Launched.” Available at www.ox.ac.uk/media/news_stories/2008/000219.html.

**Gregory S. Paul, “The Secular Revolution of the West: It’s Passed America By—So Far.” FREE INQUIRY, Summer 2002.

breakthrough findings have revolutionized our understanding of the principal factors responsible for the origin of religion, why faith has been so popular over human history and around the globe, why religion is suddenly failing in the first-world democracies, and why the least-dysfunctional societies in history are always strongly nontheistic.

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This new understanding, which I label the “New Synthesis of Popular Religion and Secularism,” overturns many of the explanations commonly advanced *by secularists* to account for the human tendency toward belief in supernatural powers and to explain why the United States remains (by Western standards) aberrantly faithful and pro-creationist. Most of all, the New Synthesis falsifies the concept of religion as a deep and true connection with a real supernatural realm. It views mass religious faith not as some strange mental enchantment that requires dedicated effort to exorcise from the human mind but rather as a mundane psychosocial matter. Popular religious belief and activity are seen as superficial coping mechanisms that are easily cast off when the majority in a given society enjoy democratic governance and a secure, comfortable, middle-class lifestyle in the context of a corporate-consumer popular culture that is shaped by the influence of modern science.

Democracy, middle-class security, and a scientific outlook constitute a triple threat to faith so powerful that across the first world it is inflicting severe damage upon popular religiosity, *except* where economic tribulations perpetuate the dysfunctional milieu that popular religion must enjoy if it is to thrive.

This article—the first comprehensive synopsis of this new research to date—will concentrate on the predominant forces that drive majority populations’ belief or nonbelief in supernatural creators over the long term, not on why a given person holds certain opinions. A standard sociological premise is that people’s self-reporting about their motivations is not reliable, because they are often imperfectly self-aware or self-deceptive. It is what the majority *actually does* when exposed to different socioeconomic conditions, as revealed through statistical measurements, that best tells us what is happening and why.

The methodology I will employ is to correlate potential causal factors with differing levels of religious versus secular opinion and activity, in democratic national populations, as measured over time by mass surveys. Those factors that do not consistently correlate with a given level of opinion cannot be primary causal agents driving majority opinion and are falsified as such; those that do reliably correlate and offer a logical causal explanation for the majority opinion are verified. First-

world democracies are the central focus, because a wealth of reliable sociological data is available; little attention is paid to presently or formerly communist states where popular opinion has been skewed by government suppression and little historical survey data exists. A vocabulary note: the term *creationism* includes all forms of belief that disfavor natural explanations of the origins and evolution of the universe and its contents.

THE NON-UNIVERSALITY OF RELIGION

Theists and atheists alike widely subscribe to the misconception that (in the words of Templeton/Oxford researcher Justin Barrett) “belief in religion seems to be an integral part of human nature, it is found across all cultures.” But those who consider faith a universal are a couple of centuries behind the times. They have overlooked the data from what we can recognize (after the fact) as an enormous sociological experiment:

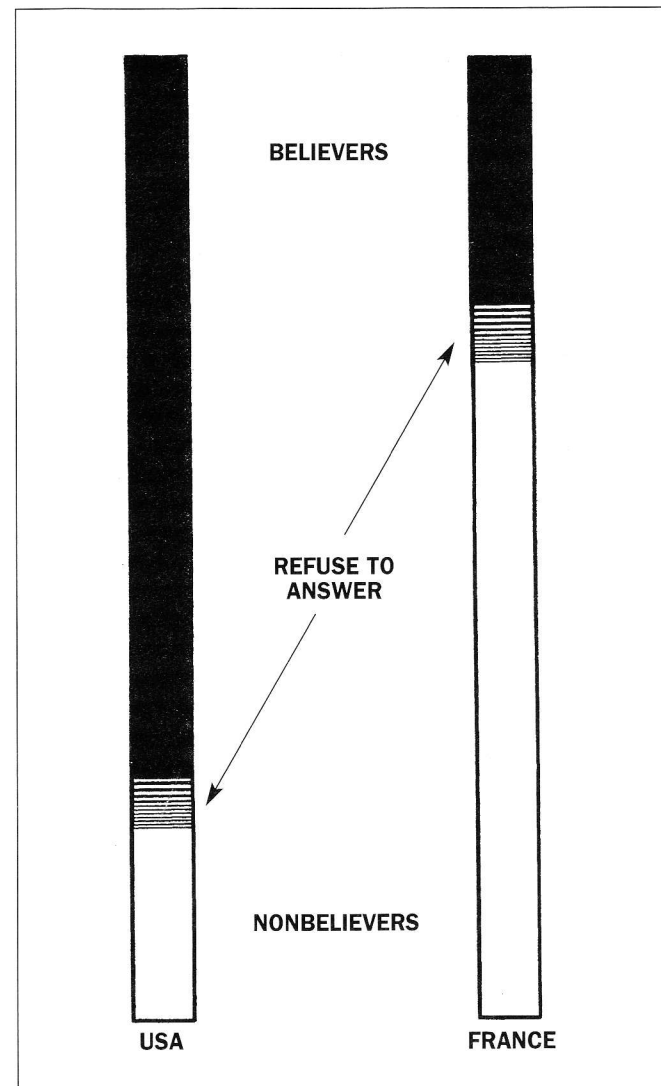
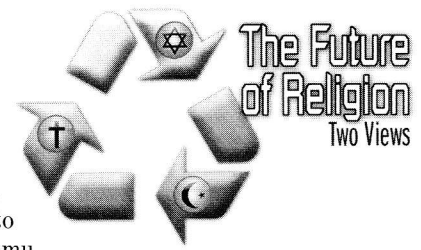
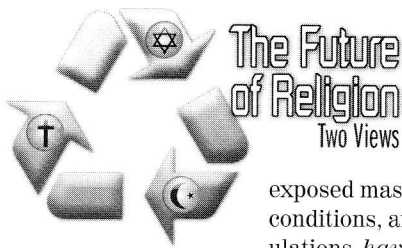


Figure 1. Comparison of those who believe or do not believe in a supreme being in the U.S. and France. (2006 Harris Survey)



The Future of Religion Two Views

the first world's industrialized democracies. For the first time in history, they exposed mass populations to modern living conditions, and large portions of those populations *have* voluntarily abandoned reli-

gious activities and beliefs. The broad secularization of western Europe, Anglo-Australasia, Canada, and other developed countries conclusively falsifies the myth that religiosity is pan-cultural and intrinsic to human nature.

Consider that in eighteen out of nineteen of the most prosperous democracies, the share of population reporting absolute belief in a god or gods ranges between as little as a few percent and, at most, half. In some of these countries, two thirds or more of citizens qualify as atheists or agnostics. Levels of religious activity are correspondingly low, and majorities—in some cases exceeding 80 percent—accept human descent from animals. This radical de-Christianization has not been offset by a corresponding rise in alternative forms of spirituality such as paganism or New Age beliefs. Meanwhile Muslims, who tend to be devout at levels no longer seen among the general population, make up only 4 percent of western Europeans.

Recognizing how thoroughly most of the first world has already secularized is an important first step toward solving the religion question. The next step is to account for the major exception to Western popular secularism, the United States. Call it the "American Anomaly," the only first-world democracy where two-thirds of the people absolutely believe in God, where religious practice and sociopolitical activism remain strong to the point that even Democrats feel they must play the religion card, and where most citizens hold atheists in low regard. Americans are no less exceptional in their views of human origins: only half accept human descent from animals, while almost as many believe that God invented humans a few thousand years ago.

Americans' anomalous retention of mass piety has caused many to imagine that faith is integral to the American character and that the nation will always be pious. But indicators show that in fact, even America is rapidly secularizing. The population that accepts evolution has edged up. The population that tells pollsters they think the Bible is built on legends and fables has soared—from 1 in 10 to nearly 1 in 4 in just three decades. The number of atheists and agnostics rose from about two million in the 1950s to as many as sixty million (a fifth of the population), according to two Harris polls designed to overcome Americans' reluctance to admit nonbelief. The nonreligious population has doubled in the last decade and half alone. Even the much-vaunted growth of Mormons is dwarfed by the unparalleled rise of disbelievers. The former is due primarily to rapid reproduction, and the latter is almost entirely due to spontaneous individual conversion (see Figure 2).

The latest Pew mega-survey reveals that only half of Americans now believe absolutely in a personal God, a striking drop from historical levels and well below that found in many second- and third-world countries. U.S. church membership has steadily declined over the last half century; if anything, the drop accelerated after September 11, 2001. Only a fifth of the population turns up in church on a typical Sunday. Once making up almost the entire population, Christians now compose

only about three quarters. Catholic numbers have held steady if only because of massive Hispanic immigration. It is well known that the once-dominant mainstream Protestant churches have dwindled almost to minority status. But more conservative Christian groups are losing ground, too. The population that views the Bible as the literal word of God has shrunk markedly, from 4 in 10 to less than a third over thirty years. Even the once-mighty Southern Baptists are dwindling.

It is time to retire popular notions of a numerically resurgent religious Right—if current trends continue, biblical literalists should be outnumbered by Bible skeptics in a decade or two.

Declining American piety follows patterns that are now well understood. Though individuals convert and de-convert, on the whole any given generation tends to retain its level of religiosity throughout life. Today's young Americans are the least theistic and most socially tolerant generation in the nation's history, even displaying a marked decline in anti-athe-

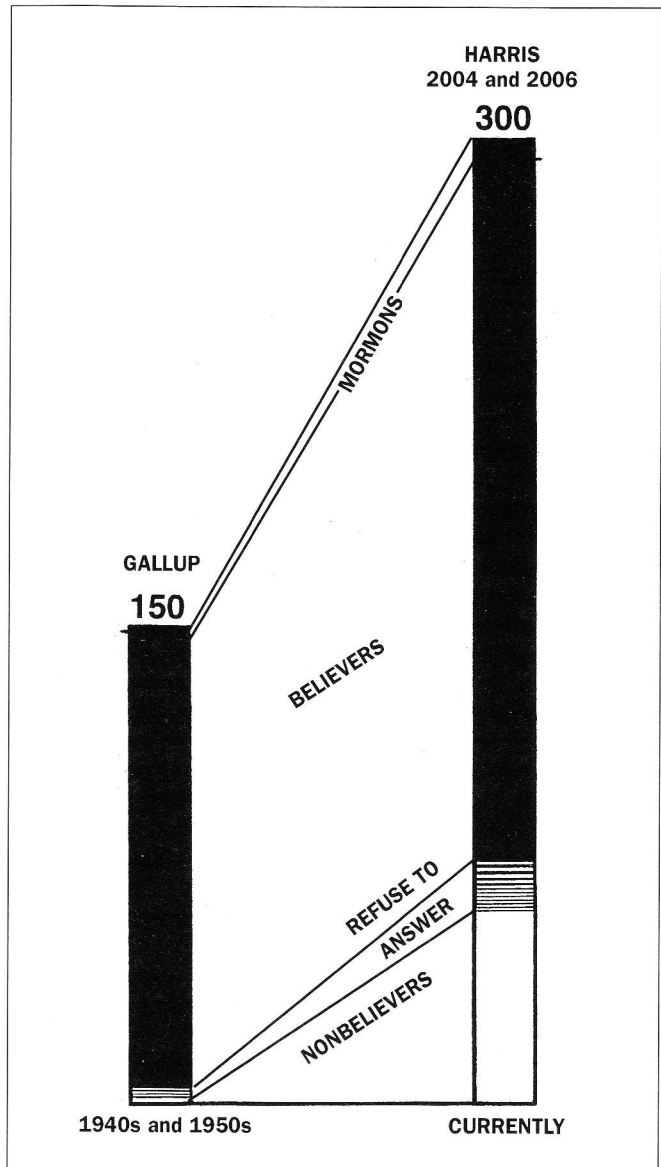


Figure 2. Number of persons in the U.S. (in millions) who believe or do not believe in a supreme being.

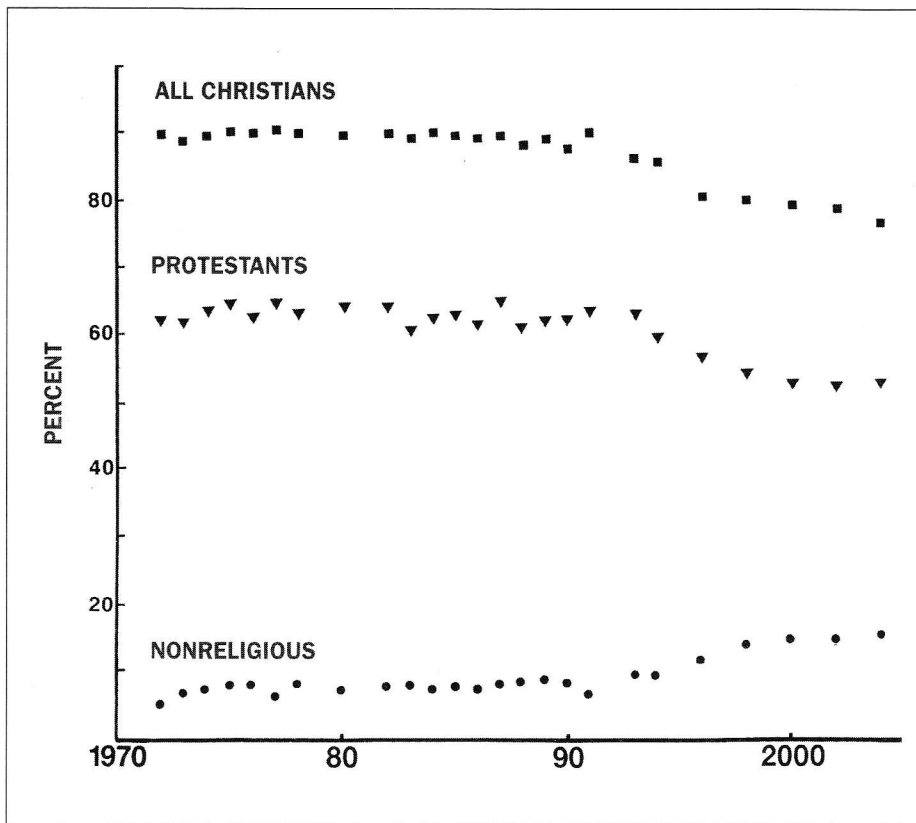


Figure 3. Relative percentages of all Christians, Protestant Christians, and nonreligious. (General Social Survey)

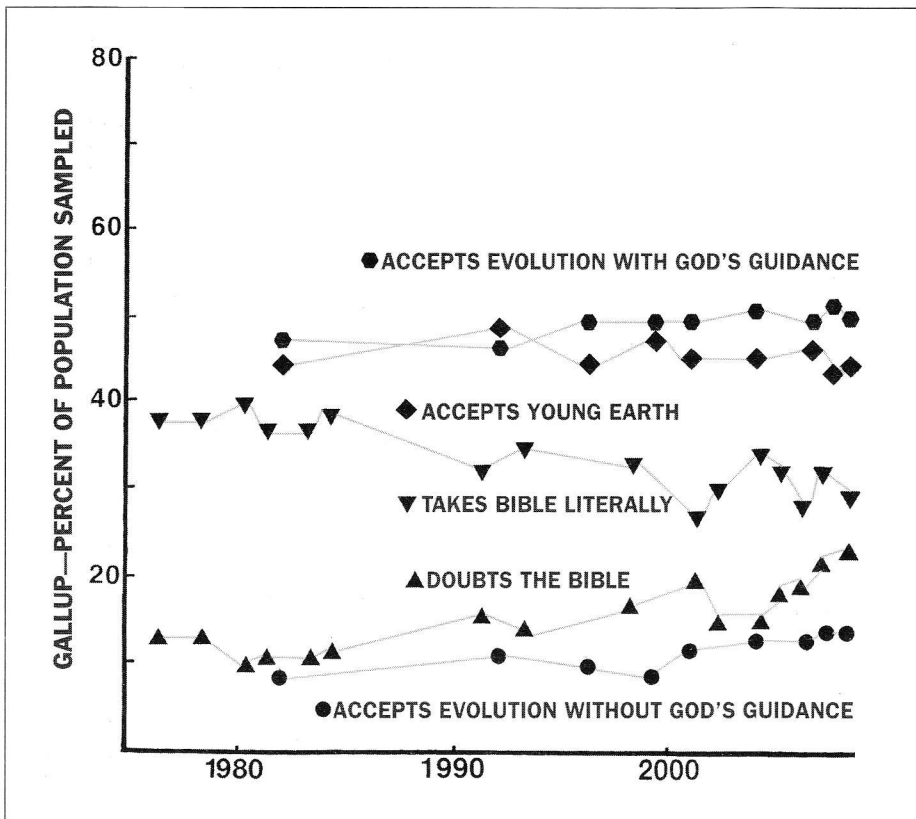


Figure 4. Attitudes regarding evolution among different groups.

ist bigotry. Some regions of the United States are already as nonreligious and pro-evolution as some of the other, more highly secularized Western nations. The American Anomaly looks less exceptional with every passing year.

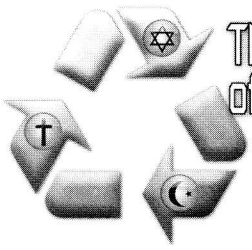
It is critical to recognize that across the first world, loss of religious belief has taken place almost entirely through a process of casual, voluntary, individual conversion. There is no organized atheist movement on a scale approaching that of the churches; there is almost no atheist proselytism. Even so, hundreds of millions have spontaneously lost interest in religion. In most first-world nations, the process was amazingly quiet; what may be the most rapid, broad-based contraction of religious faith in history has elicited remarkably little popular controversy. Only in the United States, the first-world country in which belief has lost the least ground, has society undergone a noticeable culture war:

On a planetary scale, another unprecedented phenomenon must be recognized. During the past century, the *only* life stance that has proven able to achieve significant growth by conversion has been disbelief in the supernatural. Christianity's worldwide share of population has remained stagnant, while the modest growth Islam has displayed is due mainly to rapid reproduction.

Because hundreds of millions have embraced unbelief this rapidly, this willingly, and this casually, the widespread notion that humans possess a compulsive "desire for God" stands refuted.

FAILED EXPLANATIONS FOR RELIGION

Already we have seen two popular ideas about religion and irreligion overturned. The ease and rapidity with which millions across the first world discarded their faiths demonstrates first that religion is not a human universal after all, and second that most believers hold to their faiths far less tenaciously than popular models of piety would lead us to expect. We are now in a position to test—and falsify—several broadly popular explanations for why religion began and why it has usually, if not always, enjoyed majority support. We will start with hypotheses that center on internal mental processes.



The Future of Religion

Two Views

INTERNAL CAUSES

The secular explanations commonly offered as primary causes of human religiosity include:

- fear of death or hell and a desire for an enjoyable eternal life;
- fear of societal chaos if society is not godly;
- desire for an *überfather* figure or a universal companion;
- an explanation for the meaning of life or the existence of the universe;
- a social primate's desire for community and need for practical social support;
- a means to achieve political power;
- excessive tendency to perceive patterns where they do not exist;
- retention of childhood patterns of gullible thinking into adulthood;
- a deep-set psychological need for spirituality;
- the addictive neurological effect associated with religious euphoria;
- left brain hemisphere function;
- a "God gene" through which religious belief somehow imparts a survival or reproductive benefit to individuals or related groups;
- memes that spread religious ideas like genes so effectively that humans put aside their own interests to serve mythical gods.

To theists, secular explanations are specious and even offensive, in part because the supernatural reason for faith's popularity seems so obvious—it is part of the nature of humans as created beings to believe in their creator.

Yet none of these predominantly internal mental causes, secular or supernatural, can account for the phenomenon of large-scale secularization across the first world. Why? Because any one of these posited internal mental causes is powerful enough that if it were the true mechanism behind mass belief, then we should expect most populations to be strongly religious almost all of the time. Indeed, we should expect that little short of severe government coercion could persuade most human beings to part from their creeds. If fear of death and hope for a never-ending paradise *are* primary driving forces behind mass belief, then why have the great majority of French, Swedes, and Japanese spontaneously abandoned religion? Likewise, if the need for social community is so compelling, why are western Europeans and Australians not flocking to the churches? If conspicuous religiosity is a path to political power, why have public expressions of deep piety become an electoral detriment in strongly secular democracies? Nor is the highly skeptical population of France genetically or neurologically distinct from that of, say, the more religious Polish; given this, factors that involve selective forces, including excessive pattern recognition and gullibility, cannot be decisive. Nor is there a reason to think that the brains of Danes and Canadians are more or less resistant to infectious memes. So here's the new rule—if you want to propose a new explanation for mass religiosity, the first thing it must do is pass the Test of the West. The theory must be at least compatible with the rapid decline of belief among majorities in many modern democracies.

If it can't, it's wrong.

The large disparities in popular religious opinion across first-world democracies falsify the hypothesis that belief in

and worship of supernatural entities are inherent to most, if not all, human brains. It follows that the human *environment* must play a lead role in influencing human beings either to believe in and worship unsubstantiated supernatural gods or not to do so. To the extent that internal mental causes of religion *are* effective, they can contribute to the level of religious belief only when environmental conditions are suitable for high levels of public piety.

EXTERNAL CAUSES

The question that then confronts us is, "What environmental factors are important in molding differing levels of religious opinion in the majority of populations?" A variety of environment-based hypotheses have earned wide credence; in many cases, we can now state confidently that they do not work.

The free-market hypothesis holds that America's constitutional separation of church and state compelled clerics to engage in Darwinian competition with one another to keep parishioners happy and paying for the pews, while the lazy, socialistic, state-operated churches of Europe grew lax and wasted away. This scenario is so popular that it has become part of the American mythos. It feeds indigenous theists' conceit that the Founding Fathers were inspired—divinely, perhaps—to invent the *laissez-faire* arrangement that has made faithful America so unlike ungodly Europe. Amazingly, this theory owes much of its early acceptance to one of the greatest mathematical *faux pas* in the history of sociology. The statistical studies by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke that initially established the free-market theory contained an egregious coding error: a key formula contained a -1 rather than the correct +1. As a result, the seemingly seminal results around which so much speculation has been constructed are spurious!***

If that error had never been discovered, specialists would still have ample reason to question the free-market hypothesis. Consider that Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have not had state churches since the 1800s, yet each is far less religious than the United States. The most faithful nations in western Europe are those with a single dominant church—Catholic Ireland, Italy, and Spain—yet highly secular France was dominated by the same church. Within the United States, greater levels of religious plurality tend to be associated with

***The error was revealed by David Voas, V. A. Olson, and Alasdair Crockett in a 2002 paper, "Religious Pluralism and Participation: Why Previous Research Is Wrong" (*American Sociological Review* 67(2): 212–230). Even before that extraordinary error was uncovered, Mark Chavez (coauthor of a famed 1993 study showing that actual church attendance is 50 percent lower than Americans self-report in surveys) and Philip S. Gorski had published a devastating 2001 meta-analysis of more than two dozen studies alleged to support the free-market hypothesis, concluding that "the claim that religious pluralism and religious participation are generally and positively associated . . . is not supported, and attempts to discredit countervailing evidence on methodological grounds must be rejected" ("Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27:261–281). The controversy was briefly summarized by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in their *Sacred and Secular* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), a work accessible to popular audiences that deserves wider attention than it received. Sadly, while specialists have largely rejected the free market hypothesis, it continues to be relied upon in popular discourse—including not a few essays by secularists who still trot it out as though it could explain America's exceptional level of public piety.

lower, not higher, levels of religiosity. Finally, the most pious nations on the globe include Islamic theocracies, in which no glimmer of a free market in faith exists.

European Christianity failed to prevent the mass slaughter between the faithful in the Great War and actually contributed to World War II insofar as conservative churches supported fascism. The failure of the churches to provide sound moral guidance may help to explain the Continent's postwar lack of enthusiasm for the religion. But this does not adequately explain the observation that in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where churches played a peripheral role, public piety has also plunged to levels far below those seen in the United States. There is one modern democracy where a specific event related to World War II helped spark a spectacular failure of mass faith. Shortly after the conflict, Emperor Hirohito admitted that he was not divine, and the Japanese majority has been leery of supernaturalistic claims ever since.

Another flawed theory credits cold war antagonism toward atheistic communism with fueling the anomalous resilience of faith in the United States. Cold war hysteria indeed seemed to inspire a "pro-god" reaction in the United States. The devout Dwight Eisenhower inserted God into the originally secular Pledge of Allegiance, and the nonchurchgoing Ronald Reagan played to the hilt his role as a God-fearing warrior against godless Bolshevism. But this does not explain why Christianity was already imploding in postwar Europe, which as the past target of Soviet invasion had even better reason to dread the godless hordes. Other partial theories credit American piety to a frontier heritage, high levels of immigration, and ethno-cultural diversity. But these fail, too, because highly secularized democracies exist that match or even exceed the United States in one or more of these qualities. Clearly something else must explain the American Anomaly.

THE TRIPLE THREAT TO FIRST-WORLD FAITH

The same population-trend data that has allowed us to reject both the internal and some external causes for popular religiosity allows us to determine certain valid environmental reasons why religion in the West finds itself in dire trouble.

Modern science, evolution, and education. For millennia, religious explanations for the existence of a universe containing humans encountered little competition, because scientific research hardly existed. Further, during the early modern period, much revealed by the emerging sciences seemed to verify the need for a hyper-intelligent creator. If *contemporary* science confirmed the existence of a designer—for instance, if geologists, paleontologists, and geneticists had shown that there is no consistent order to the appearance of organisms

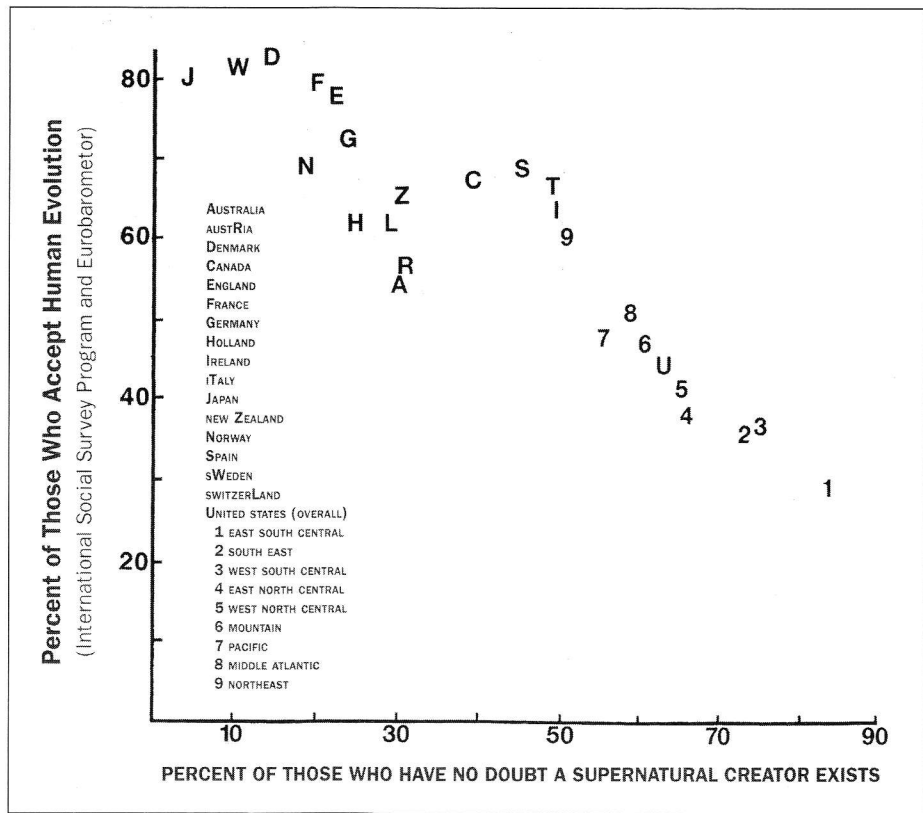
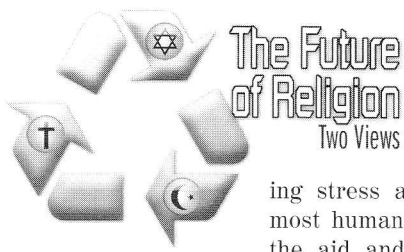


Figure 5. Attitudes about evolution around the world.

and that they are too genetically different to be related to one another—then belief in some form of creator would remain prevalent even among educated Westerners. Instead, during the last century and a half, biology and other sciences have refuted even Paleyan intelligent design, to say nothing of the Genesis story, so that many educated Westerners find belief in supernatural gods an intellectual stretch. As Richard Dawkins observes, the scientific environment within which first-worlders dwell permits, even encourages, nontheism. It is not necessary that nonscientists be exhaustively informed on these matters—simply living in a culture whose scientific paradigm does not demand belief in a supernatural designer is sufficient for disbelief to arise on a large scale. On the individual and national levels, higher levels of education correspond to lower rates of religiosity and creationism on a personal and national basis. College is a potent secularizer: every year of higher education suppresses the religiosity 7 percent of the student body. Across the first world, including parts of the United States, lower levels of popular supernaturalism are logically accompanied by lower levels of creationism. Mass popular disbelief in a creator simply would not be possible if not for the materialistic findings of modern science and popular knowledge of the same.

Popular secularism is a three-legged stool, and its first leg can be labeled as "The Contribution by Naturalistic Science." Important as this is, the science and education factor cannot explain why the United States remains more religious than other advanced democracies.

Economic and societal security. It has long been known that levels of popular religiosity and creationism drop as income levels rise; this is seen on both the personal and



The Future of Religion

Two Views

national scales. Poverty engenders discomfort and want for basic needs, raising stress and anxiety sufficiently that most humans will seek relief by inviting the aid and protection of supernatural powers. However, matters are not as simple as that. Here we find a reason why social scientists should be *grateful* that the

democracy. Other socioeconomic features similarly distinguish religious America from its more secular counterparts. These include the absence of universal health care (present in every other prosperous nation), lesser job security, and less extensive social safety nets. There is also a correlation between religiosity and the level of societal health versus pathology as measured by major indicators of social conditions. I have constructed a Successful Societies Scale (SSS), which compares collective scores based on levels of homicide, incarceration, youth and adult mortality, suicide, STDs, teen pregnancy, abortion, fertility, marriage and marriage failure, alcohol consumption, corruption, life satisfaction, per-capita income, income disparity, poverty, work hours, and employment levels. The SSS can be compared to levels of popular religiosity as measured by rates of absolute belief in God, belief in an afterlife, biblical literalism, frequency of prayer, attendance at religious services, and (negatively) by rates of atheism and agnosticism and acceptance of evolution. Falsifying the claim chronically offered by theists that only religious societies can be socially successful, "Christian America" in fact scores as the most dysfunctional nation in the first world. On some indices, the United States scores so poorly that its status as a first-world nation must be regarded as provisional. In con-

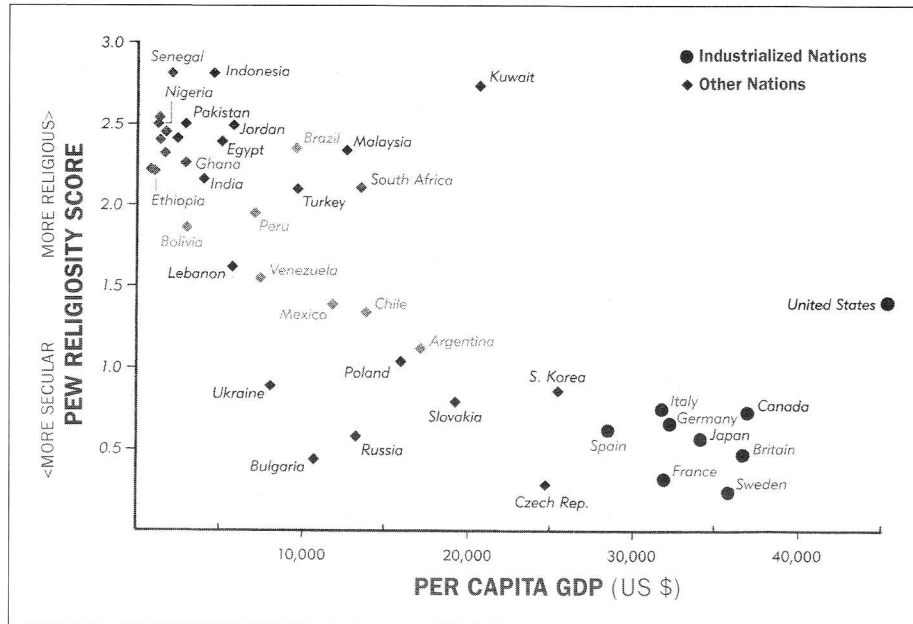


Figure 6. Levels of religiosity, secularism, and per-capita income.

American Anomaly exists, for if the United States were not so religious we might never have recognized that a simple rise in prosperity does not automatically suppress mass religiosity in favor of popular nontheism. As it is, America stands as a statistical outlier, the one example proving that a wealthy first-world nation can retain a high level of religiosity. This refutes any simple correlation between high per-capita income and the high levels of secularism found in all of the other advanced democracies. Clearly, additional factors must be involved.

One such critical factor is not per-capita income but rather income *inequality*. Across the first world, lower income inequality correlates with lower religiosity. Higher income inequality correlates with higher religiosity. The pattern is statistically progressive, and no deviations are known. With its low taxes, relatively high rate of poverty, and huge disparity between incomes of the poor and rich, the United States displays greater income disparity than any other industrialized

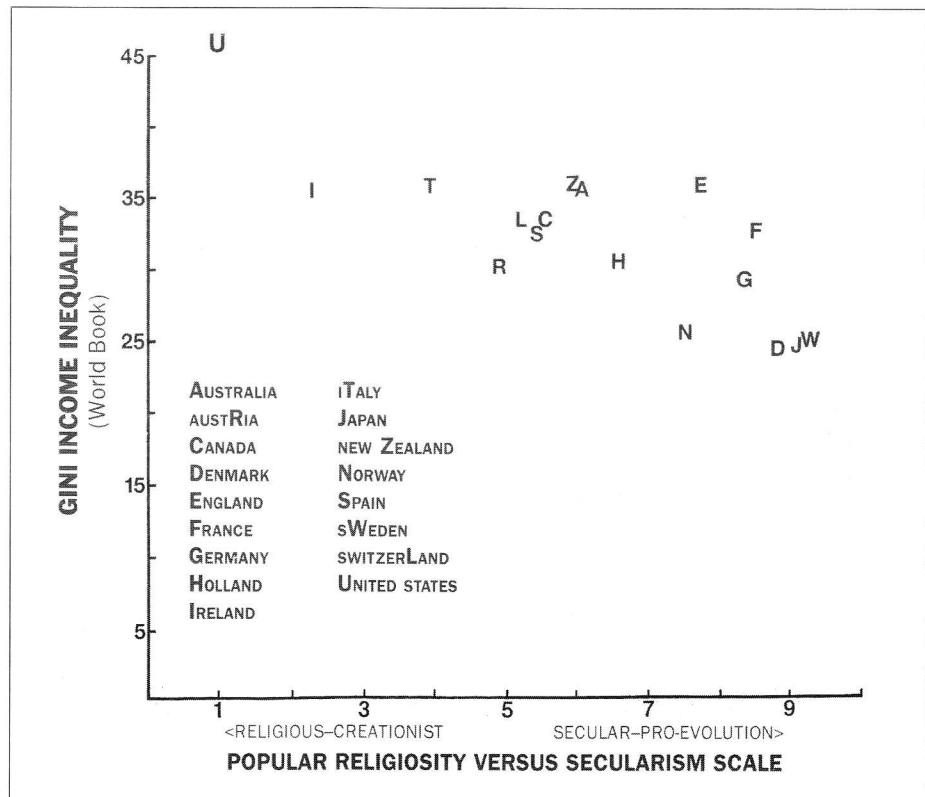


Figure 7. Income related to religious belief around the world.

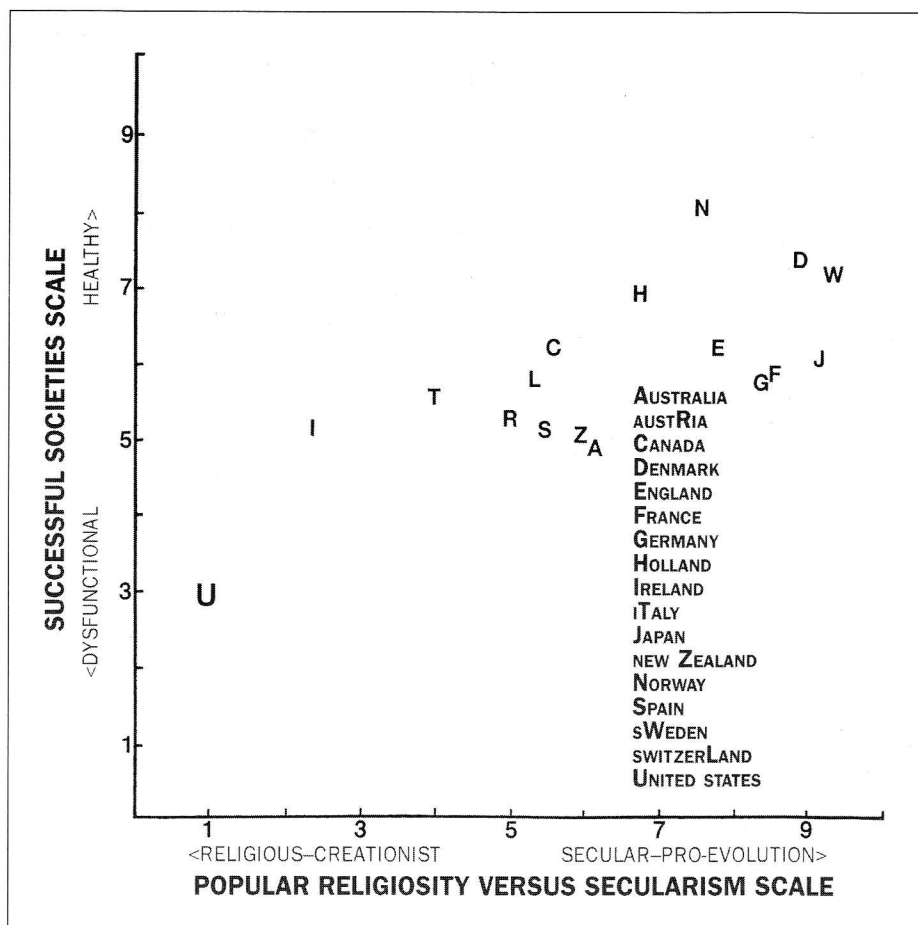


Figure 8. Societal health related to religious belief.

trast, the most secular democracies enjoy the best societal conditions achieved in human history. Like income inequality, these indices of social dysfunction closely track the prevalence of religiosity. Major deviations from this statistically progressive correlation are absent.

Here's how the socioeconomic-security scenario works. Among the first world's nineteen prosperous democracies, all but the United States have adopted pragmatic, progressive, and secular socioeconomic policies that maximize the financial security of the middle class (that is to say, the majority of citizens). In most first-world countries, it is hard to lose middle-class status—no western European or Australian goes bankrupt due to overwhelming medical bills. These high levels of financial security, lower levels of income disparity, and more modest rates of societal dysfunction reduce personal stress levels to the degree that middle-class majorities in western Europe, Canada, and Australia feel secure and comfortable. This security and comfort being achieved, the number of citizens who feel the need to seek the aid and protection of supernatural deities has sunken to historic lows as citizens abandon their former churches in droves. In addition, comprehensive governmental social assistance programs displace much of the faith-based charitable complex that churches have historically used to extend their influence over the lay population. Moreover, secular societies tend to favor other pragmatic social policies such as extensive sex-education and domestic violence inter-

vention that further suppress societal dysfunctions. The popular secularization these pragmatic policies induce is accidental, but nonetheless the effect is so powerful that it has occurred in every progressive first-world democracy. It has occurred despite the absence of a large-scale organized atheistic movement and has yet to be reversed in any country by a major religious revival.

Popular religiosity shifts on a time scale of decades rather than years, but even so the speed of change can be startling. In the 1970s, Ireland was an impoverished bastion of Catholicism; nowadays the "Celtic Tiger" is coming off of a prolonged high-tech boom and is typically "Eurosecular." Spain was still a fascist Catholic state in 1975 when *Saturday Night Live* premiered, with Chevy Chase lampooning the just-deceased Generalissimo Franco. Today it is a full-fledged first-world nation that has recently adopted gay marriage.

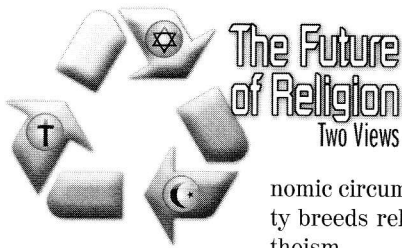
We can now say with some confidence that the United States is a religious anomaly *because* its socioeconomic system is correspondingly anomalous and pathological in contrast to first-world norms. Citizens enjoy far lower levels of government support and protection. Most members of the middle class face serious risk of financial and

personal ruin if they lose their insecure jobs or their private health insurance. Personal bankruptcies number in the millions each year, most involving uninsured medical expenses. The need to acquire wealth as a protective buffer contributes to an intense, Darwinian race to the top, often built on debt, which further boosts stress levels. So do the exceptionally high rates of homicide, incarceration, juvenile and adult mortality, abortion (often signaling failure to use contraception), STD infections, teen pregnancy, and divorce that result from America's dysfunctional socioeconomic system.

Research indicates that the mere existence of strong income disparity creates widespread psychological strain. Within the United States, high levels of economic insecurity, income disparity, and societal dysfunction are all associated with high levels of religiosity. Middle-class Americans feel anxious and fearful enough to seek the assistance of a friendly creator.

Despite all this economic and societal dysfunction, when surveyed, Americans claim levels of life satisfaction and happiness similar to those reported by citizens of more functional Western democracies. This suggests that many U.S. citizens use religion as a form of self-medication to alleviate the chronic stress and anxiety engendered by their society's many failings.

It is no coincidence that religiosity is low in every first-world nation with universal health coverage and high in the only one without it. High levels of national religiosity are largely a symptom of dysfunctional socioeconomic circumstances, and high



The Future of Religion Two Views

levels of secularism are largely a symptom of healthier, more secure socioeconomic circumstances. Simply put, insecurity breeds religion; security promotes non-theism.

The second leg in the three-legged stool of popular secularism is thus “The Contribution by Socioeconomic Security.”

The corporate-consumer popular culture. Although modern science provides the matrix for the spread of disbelief across the first world, and socioeconomic circumstances have helped to ravage faith in progressive democracies, we lack an explanation for one other remarkable phenomenon. This is the fact that even while public religiosity in the United States remains high, on many levels America is nonetheless growing more secular.

“Although socioeconomic circumstances remain sufficiently primitive in the United States to encourage correspondingly primitive levels of popular religiosity, the nation’s exceptionally aggressive corporate-consumer mainstream culture is sufficient to propel a delayed, Americanized version of the secularization process.”

Understanding this phenomenon requires understanding some of the complex strategic choices religious leaders have made, sometimes unwisely, in the face of socioeconomic change.

During the nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth century, religious traditionalists essentially owned mainstream Western culture. Even so, they kept a certain distance from the corporate/capitalist culture, which leading divines often viewed as coarse. For its part, in the age of brute industrialization, capitalists valued religion principally as a tool for instilling the work ethic into a reluctant labor force. As the twentieth century wore on, religious traditionalists began to lose control over mainstream culture. Theo-conservative elitists like William F. Buckley counseled the faith-based Right to make up for its loss of social power by seeking to leverage its *political* power. This it would do by allying with corporate interests under the aegis of the Republican Party.

But this strategy failed to account for shifting social conditions. Just as religious elites were opening their arms to capitalism, capitalists started to realize that they had less use for faith. Fading were the days when capital needed a vast, God-fearing, docile labor force. Capital’s new aim was to persuade Western majorities to become materialistic consumers focused on status and animated by values and life goals often antagonistic to those associated with traditional culture and piety.

This irony is a rich one. Leaders on the religious Right bewail the erosion of Sunday church attendance—yet it is the very business interests with which they made common cause that conducted a victorious campaign to repeal the once-widespread Sunday blue laws. Major corporations adopt gay-friendly policies regarding hiring and benefits, vexing their theo-conservative allies; but capitalists care more about the gay community’s spending power. Consider the irony when a lead spokesperson for American Express is Ellen DeGeneres, by all accounts the nation’s favorite lesbian, whose popular talk-show regularly hosts guests like presidential candidate John McCain trolling for youth votes, followed by Laura and Jenna Bush promoting the latter’s book. The Coors family richly supports conservative Christian causes—with money it earns marketing light beers often associated with college binge-drinking. Arch-conservative Rupert Murdoch owns Fox, whose motion picture and television units churn out “theologically incorrect” media fare that fuels cultural secularism—all of this while conservative pundits on his Fox News Network denounce secular liberals for de-Christianizing the culture!

On the whole, religious elites seem to have made an exceptionally bad bargain in allying with a business sector that is effectively an agent of secularization. Theological conservatives realized some short-term benefits; their dalliance with capital furnished them with political power, which they used to delay America’s secularization by barring some of the progressive secular socioeconomic policies that so damaged public piety elsewhere in the West. Over the long term, however, the mass consumerism corporations engendered—and thrive on—has operated to overcome socioeconomic insecurity, initiating a sharp decline in religious devotion and activity. The traditionalist elements that once dominated mainstream culture have been driven into a parallel subculture. There, for all their genuine power and influence, traditionalists remain a “square” minority cohort. When traditional piety and pop culture square off, pop culture usually wins hands down.

Conservative theists have pretty much lost the culture war as the material demands of the public synergize with those of the corporate sector that supplies them to form a liberating, deeply secularizing consumer culture.

The third leg in the three-legged stool of popular secularism is thus “The Contribution by Corporate-Consumer Culture.”

SYNOPSIS OF THE TRIPLE THREAT

It is time to join the three hypotheses into a coherent whole. The first threat to mass faith is modern science, especially evolutionary theory, which made broad disbelief in the gods both possible and probable in nations whose socioeconomic environment favored widespread nontheism. The second threat is the social and financial security associated with historically benign conditions such as long life-spans, middle-class security, universal medical coverage, job protections, an extensive social safety net, and low societal dysfunction. Without exception, this combination has grievously injured faith in every country that has achieved it, resulting in strongly secular democracies. This effect draws added power because democratic secularization of the population tends to be associated with, and encourages, adoption of progressive, secular socioeconomic policies that further encourage secularization in a classic sociological feedback loop. In the secular democracies,

socioeconomic security has combined with the third threat, the mass-consumer culture—in part imported from Christian America—radically reforming eighteen of the nineteen wealthiest nations away from religious commitment. Although socioeconomic circumstances remain sufficiently primitive in the United States to encourage correspondingly primitive levels of popular religiosity, the nation's exceptionally aggressive corporate-consumer, mainstream culture is sufficient to propel a delayed, Americanized version of the secularization process.

Religion, then, has proved able to thrive only in populations whose living conditions are sufficiently defective to cause the majority to resort to petitioning speculative supernatural powers for aid. The mere act of running a society in a competent manner causes most of the population to lose interest in church and God. A sufficiently benevolent national environment is automatically antagonistic to mass faith: this is a core reason why a highly religious country never has been, and probably never can be, socially healthy—and vice versa. When they have the power to do so, conservative theists tend to oppose effective social and economic policies; this is almost certainly a contributing factor to the poor performance of nations of faith. Can a more liberally religious national society better cope with modernity? The answer is no—the progressive values characteristic of moderate-to-liberal denominations are already too secular to inspire widespread devotion. Meanwhile nonconservative denominations tend to favor the adoption of progressive programs that reduce societal dysfunction and thus further undermine popular religiosity. It follows that only voluntarily secular cultures, not religious ones of any type, can achieve historically low levels of dysfunction—both because a beneficent environment suppresses religion and because secularists favor the policies that create and extend that environment.

Together, then, the contributions by naturalistic science, socioeconomic security, and corporate-consumer culture combine to form the “Triple-Threat Hypothesis of Democratic Secularization.” In order to falsify this hypothesis, an opponent would need to demonstrate that there exists a highly religious/creationist democracy that is prosperous, enjoys low income disparity, provides high security for the middle class, and displays low levels of societal dysfunction. Alternatively, an opponent could demonstrate the existence of a strongly secular, pro-evolution democracy that is prosperous but suffers from high income disparity, low middle-class security, and high levels of societal dysfunction. No society fitting either of those descriptions is known to history. An opponent might also seek to demonstrate that factors other than the Triple Threat account for known facts about democratic secularization. To achieve that, one would have to show that other factors provide similarly effective explanations for the disparate levels of religiosity in modern nations. It is doubtful this can be done.

THE BEGINNING OF RELIGION AND THE SOCIOECONOMIC INSECURITY HYPOTHESIS OF FAITH

Armed with the knowledge that most people's religious opinions flow primarily from environmental rather than internal causes, we can attempt to reconstruct the origins of faith-based supernaturalism. Although the details will always be obscure, the human invention of the supernatural is neither mysterious or complicated. Considering the unfavorable cir-

cumstances in which early humans lived, it would be remarkable if they had not concocted numinous entities. At some point in human evolution, perhaps a few hundred thousand years ago and no later than circa 40,000 B.C.E., our ancestors evolved the selectively advantageous mutations that code for a high-level imagination and the capacity to invent abstract concepts. In addition, humans were doing two things other animals do—dreaming and using mind-altering drugs. It would be understandable that ancient hunter-gatherers interpreted the intense and bizarre experiences associated with dreams and natural hallucinogens as real, as an actual connection with other realms. Helpless to explain how the world came into existence or how it worked, our ancestors were awed by the power of storms and natural disasters. This Paleolithic stew was bound to inspire early humans (perhaps led by drug-using shamans) to invent fictional entities that ancient peoples

“With its low taxes, relatively high rate of poverty, and huge disparity between incomes of the poor and rich, the United States displays greater income disparity than any other industrialized democracy—and is, as we have seen, anomalously pious.”

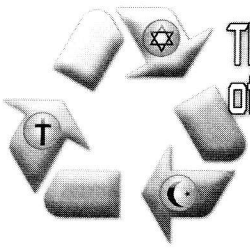
hoped would help them understand and survive in a brutal world. It is plausible that internal mental factors such as fear of death, improved group-bonding, power accumulation, or a neurological bias toward transcendental thinking might have played subsidiary roles in the origin of faith, but this was possible only because the turbulent environment was ideal for the rise of popular supernaturalism.

Impoverished, risk-filled conditions have been the norm for most humans ever since. Organized supernaturalism developed extravagantly, with emerging theological elites exploiting its influence over the masses to consolidate their own power. Popular religiosity of just this primitive sort persists today across the second and third worlds, wherever conditions are sufficiently dysfunctional to support popular faith. Religion is thus a superficial, primitive, and dysfunctional condition; widespread popular rejection of supernatural beliefs is the more advanced and less pathological human state.

This theory of religion's rise and popular acceptance is the “Socioeconomic Insecurity Hypothesis of Faith.”

MATERIALISM: THE TRULY UNIVERSAL HUMAN CONDITION

Imaginary religion is the accidental by-product of high-level cognition, a human capability whose primary selective advantage was to empower humans to conceive of new tools and goods that



The Future of Religion Two Views

could be created within the material world. In other words, the quality that can be said to be truly, genetically integral to the human mind is not transcendentalism but *materialism*. Religion, which on this view is not genetically coded for, can and *has* disappeared as a majority opinion in a number of societies. In contrast, materialism is so primary to the human mind that it is a feature of every

“Religion . . . has proved able to thrive only in populations whose living conditions are sufficiently defective to cause the majority to resort to petitioning speculative supernatural powers for aid.”

major population. Stone Age peoples strove to produce and accumulate items of value and adornment that satisfied both practical needs and vanity. Fascination with material goods characterizes all civilizations, which can largely be understood as mechanisms for the expansion, acquisition, and display of worldly possessions. Small groups that choose impoverishment, such as monastic communities, are scarce; *societies* that reject materialism even in part are even rarer. Much religious activity actually serves a materialist agenda, from the proliferation of religious trinkets to the erection of cathedrals. Even so, the materialist drive has been taken to extremes by religiously neutral industrial capitalism, under which many are unable to resist the compulsion to devote entire lives accumulating wealth far beyond logical needs. For better or worse, it is the desire for material things ingrained in our DNA that has made the corporate project of promoting the consumer culture at the expense of religion so successful.

THE NATURES OF POPULAR FAITH, RATIONALISM, AND THE CULTURE WAR

So what do the following phenomena tell us about the nature of popular religion?

- The popularity of faith in all dysfunctional nations never “cleansed” of religion by communism
- The casual ease with which hundreds of millions of financially secure, well-educated first-worlders have cast off religion
- The much stronger genetic predisposition toward the material than the spiritual

For the majority, religiosity appears to be a superficial, fear-driven psychological means of alleviating chronic stress and anxiety created by an insecure societal environment. It is readily and normally cast off when socioeconomic conditions are sufficiently benign. To put it another way, most humans

are religious only when their financial situation is deficient enough to prod them to look for help from the beyond. Theosupernaturalism is best understood as self-aggrandizement; it is neither the noble self-sacrifice adherents prefer to feel it is nor the inane self-sacrifice some skeptics think it is. It follows that most who claim to serve God actually want God to serve them, a truth they and their leaders are loath to admit for fear of exposing mass faith for what it really is.

Humans continually petition the gods for mundane services, from winning sporting events to saving their jobs to curing illness to bringing world peace to providing a Club Med afterlife. This mundanity makes sociological and psychological sense. What most “religious believers” are really interested in is not erudite doctrine, nor do they yearn to spend their time communing with the gods for the sake of some cosmic connection. On the contrary, they are focused on their daily lives and on the gods as magical friends who might improve their situations.

So, far from being either universal or integral to human minds, most religious faith is a casual opinion of convenience. Were it otherwise, it would not be the case that secure prosperity alone should cause most people to jettison their supernatural beliefs. The popular premise that faith in a creator represents a deep, transcendent connection with supernatural reality is correspondingly refuted. And it follows that the common opinion (recently expressed by Chris Hedges on Book TV) that “those who fail to fully explore the religious impulse, the ability to connect with those transcendent forces, are not fully human” is unsubstantiated bigotry.

And what of creationism? Just over 4 in 10 Americans profess to believe in the Genesis story, yet fewer than a third describe themselves as Bible literalists. What can explain that gap? I suspect that for tens of millions of American Christians, young-earth creationism is not a firmly held belief but a superficially held protest opinion. It is part of a larger phenomenon—the rise of right-wing religious political activism since the 1960s—best understood as a reactionary dissent against the secularization of American culture. It began with the new injection of evolution into public education following the Sputnik scare (which inspired the creationist classic, Henry Morris’s *The Genesis Flood*). It gained speed with the ban on official school prayer then accelerated in angry reaction to the sixties counterculture. And it has been sustained by the evolution of the once anti-establishment counterculture into the modern extreme consumer culture, ironically supervised by Christian conservatives’ own corporate cronies.

Consider also the perpetual complaint of America’s theological elite that their followers’ religiosity is shallow. They’re right: only a small fraction of conservative Christians strive to live a strict biblical lifestyle. Divorce is rampant among born-again. Though polls show that the Christian-conservative third of the population sharply disapproves of premarital sex, surveys reveal that over 8 in 10 of them engage in it (or did so prior to matrimony). Or consider so many Americans’ recently documented penchant for switching religions in the same casual way one might change one’s favorite brand of car—or ketchup. Clearly for these “believers,” religion is more like a consumer product, a subject of cursory and plastic allegiance, and less like an unshakable devotion.

Nor is the reality much different for popular nontheism, which is also in most cases casual and superficial. The ease

with which humans embrace speculative supernatural concepts, as well as the ease with which they are abandoned when material conditions permit, confirm that atheistic opinion is no more integral to the human condition than is religion. Much as we might wish otherwise, few atheists and agnostics base their decisions not to believe on careful, rational analysis of philosophical and scientific arguments. (Secular Europeans score about as poorly on tests of scientific knowledge as do more devout Americans.) It appears that most nonreligious first-world citizens raised in religious surroundings simply lose interest in the supernatural when their lives become sufficiently pleasant and assured, drifting away from church with relatively little thought about the matter. Many born into secular families have invested even less reflection in their life stance, which they have never felt the need to change.

The casual nature of both religious and nonreligious opinion accords with the quiet, laissez-faire way in which religion has lost popularity in most first-world countries. It follows that the Culture War between faith and secularism is not what many think it is—it is not a grand ideological battle of ideas in which the side that does the best job of convincing the body politic wins. The ideological struggle is largely limited to partisan activists and the intellectual elite. This is true in Europe; only in the United States is any major portion of the population involved in the theo-cultural war—and that is only because America's socioeconomic environment inspires a large minority to be religious belligerents. Because popular opinion on religion is actually a more humdrum side effect of a given scientific, social, economic, and commercial environment, it is difficult for partisans on either side to mold popular opinion in the manner they desire. Educational and propaganda efforts will always have limited impact. The advent of universal health care should, in particular, do more to promote further secularization of America than any other single item. The lack of truly intense popular interest in either theism or nontheism also helps explain why the Western churches have not succeeded in stopping, much less reversing, the slide away from faith and creationism.

In the final analysis, it makes little difference whether organized religious groups work hard to keep their flocks faithful—just as it makes no difference that no broad, grass-roots organized atheistic movement has ever emerged.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Because materialism is a deeper part of the human psyche and a more stable feature of human societies than religion, theists' perpetual hope that a "profound human need for spirituality" must eventually compel a revival of faith is a mere speculative wish. The Triple Threat Hypothesis of Democratic Secularization predicts that the future course of religion versus secularism will continue to be determined mainly by the scientific, social, economic, and commercial environmental conditions under which populations live. Organized religions have never faced anything as perilous as the Triple Threat before, and their ability to resist the forces of modernity appears to be minimal.

It follows that American secularization should continue, and may accelerate, until America is no more religious than other first-world nations. It is also likely that secularism will proceed even further than it already has in the world's most secularized nations. Contemporary surveys show that Europe's youth are exceptionally nonspiritual, an orientation that this cohort will likely carry throughout life.

Theists' best—and probably only—hope for their dream of a massive religious revival in the West would be a prolonged economic reversal that degrades the majority's sense of comfort and security to the point that most abandon rationalism for irrationalism. But even that might not work: religion's failure to make great strides in most formerly communist states suggests that once a population has become highly nontheistic it may resist returning to supernaturalism even in the face of material insecurity.

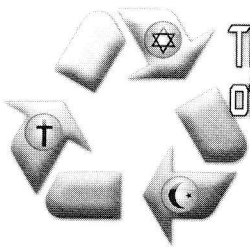
“Religion is . . . a superficial, primitive,
and dysfunctional condition; widespread
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is the more advanced and less
pathological human state.”

On a planetary scale, if the majority of the planet's inhabitants can one day achieve a degree of secure, middle-class prosperity like that enjoyed in today's secular democracies, then religion should deteriorate across the world in the way it already has in the West. If, on the other hand, the bulk of humanity remains mired in inadequate socioeconomic circumstances, then religious supernaturalism will continue to enjoy considerable success.

With the question of why religion exists basically solved, perhaps the millions the Templeton Fund and Oxford University are about to invest in their collaboration can be saved.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The environment-centered Socioeconomic Insecurity Hypothesis, a component of the New Synthesis of Popular Religion and Secularism, is the most comprehensive and robust explanation of the core questions concerning religion as a popular phenomenon. Still, its explanatory power is not universal. It does not apply to all aspects of religiosity, some of which may stem from internal mental factors. The hypothesis does not address competition between faiths within the context of a human environment that favors mass piety. So it remains to be explained why Christianity and Islam have proven more successful in recent centuries relative to Judaism and polytheistic alternatives. It is plausible that the eternal paradise promised by Christianity and Islam is dispositive here, much as I consider it less relevant to larger issues. The Socioeconomic Insecurity Hypothesis also fails to deal with certain smaller puzzles. Why does a minority among the secure and prosperous persist in religious devotion? Why in particular do some scientists publicly proclaim their unsubstantiated faith in the supernatural? The hope for perpetual life may dominate here, despite its apparent irrelevance to



The Future of Religion Two Views

larger questions. Smaller issues like these are difficult to test; in some cases, solutions may require a deeper understanding of brain function. Also little investigated: just how are the hundreds of millions of

newly nonreligious citizens of highly secular democracies getting by without the psychological and social benefits that supposedly stem from being religiously active? Because the Triple Threat has been operative only for a limited time, it is not yet known how multitudes will adapt to life without "invisible means of support." Nor is it clear just how anti-supernaturalist an advanced society can become. **fi**

“... it makes little difference whether organized religious groups work hard to keep their flocks faithful—just as it makes no difference that no broad, grass-roots organized atheistic movement has ever emerged... secularization will continue apace even so.”

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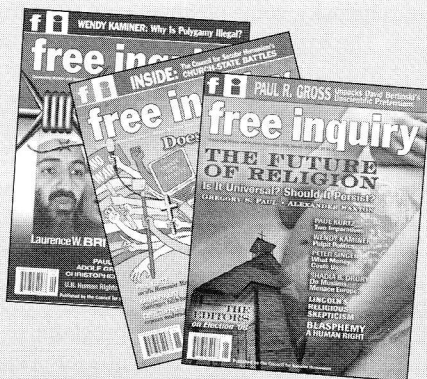
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