

Secularizations

by Richard John Neuhaus

As with most academic traditions, and especially those that are viewed as soft, there are orthodoxies and fashions, and sometimes sudden turns, that are conventionally described—following Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* of almost half a century ago—as paradigm shifts. Sociology is generally seen as one of those soft disciplines. From its once enormous popularity in the academy, it has in recent decades fallen upon hard times. As Peter Berger and others have argued, sociology did itself in by, among other things, its reckless abandonment of the intellectual discipline appropriate to being a discipline and its eagerness to make itself useful to sundry ideological and social causes. (See Berger’s “Whatever Happened to Sociology?” in the October 2002 issue of FIRST THINGS.)

Now a funny thing may be happening on the long road from the work of nineteenth-century Auguste Comte, commonly called the father of sociology. Comte envisioned a progression of three stages of history—from the theological to the metaphysical to the scientific. He left little doubt that these transitions were more or less inevitable and certainly the story of progress. If sociology was always a soft discipline compared to the hard sciences that it sought to emulate, the softest of the soft was the sociology of religion. There was a strong tendency to view religion as something vestigial, prescientific, and therefore premodern. Enter the well-known “secularization theory” that reigned almost unchallenged until the 1970s. In perhaps its most influential form, it was propounded by Max Weber (1864–1920) and, to put it too simply, claimed that there is a necessary connection between modernity and religion: As modernity advances, religion retreats. This near-inexorable process is called secularization.

As frequently discussed in these pages, secularization theory is now challenged on many fronts, and not least of all by Peter Berger, once one of its most influential proponents. The advocates of secularization theory had over many decades referred to “American exceptionalism.” This reflected the awareness that, if modernity necessarily entails secularization, it is something of a puzzle as to why the most modern of societies is also so vibrantly religious. Hundreds of books have been written in an attempt to explain American exceptionalism. In recent years, however, the table has been turned, and the question of increasingly intense interest is “European exceptionalism,” meaning especially western and northern European secularity. Viewed in global terms, the American mix of modernity and religion seems to be the normal pattern. The interesting question is not why America is so religious but why Europe is so secular.

Here are at least some parts of the answer: the historical and current relationships between church and state, the impact of social pluralism, radically different understandings of the Enlightenment, different understandings of what it means to be an intellectual, different institutional configurations for maintaining an intellectual tradition, and different ways in which the institutions of religion relate to factors such as class and ethnicity.

Let it readily be admitted that these ways of discussing the question can easily get mired in the gobbledygook of sociology talk. Some might feel more at home in addressing the differences

between Europe and America in terms of the latter's providential purpose, and a good case can be made for doing so, but sociology doesn't do Divine Providence, which is just as well.

The new thinking about secularization does not reduce everything to an analysis of class or ethnic struggles, power rivalries, or economic dynamics. In her 2004 book *The Roads to Modernity*, for instance, the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb examines how the Enlightenment meant very different things in Europe and America. In America it was understood to be religion friendly, indeed religiously grounded, whereas in most of Europe it was a battle against the *ancien régime*, very much including the religious establishments. As Himmelfarb puts it, the Enlightenment in America took the form of "the politics of liberty" while in Europe it followed the French "ideology of reason." This is a persuasive analysis, to which it needs to be added that in the last half century the American intellectual class has turned decidedly toward the French understanding of the Enlightenment, a turn that is, underlying specific policies in dispute, a driving force in what are aptly called the "culture wars" in this country.

A great difference between Europeans and Americans is that Europeans are generally disposed to see religion more as a problem than as a solution. There are important caveats, to be sure, but the generalization holds. This is made evident in a number of ways. To take an obvious instance, there is the dramatic disparity between church attendance in Europe and the United States. In recent years, a number of scholars have challenged the claim, based on survey research of almost a century, that 40-plus percent of Americans go to church each week. Perhaps the statistics, gathered in various ways, are inflated, but the interesting question is why Americans who don't go to church regularly claim that they do. They *think* they should. For most Americans, it is the normal and approved thing to do. People are sometimes better understood by what they think they should do than by what they do. In Europe, going to church is to be in a self-understood minority; it is to take a stand, even to be countercultural.

In a new book coauthored by Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?* the question is put this way: "Is secularization intrinsic or extrinsic to the modernization process? If Europe is secular because it is modern, then modernization and secularization acquire an organic link. If Europe is secular because it is European, then the reasoning becomes quite different. In light of the material presented in this book, we conclude that the latter is the much more likely option."

The authors draw on the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt, an Israeli sociologist, who has written extensively on "multiple modernities." What explains European exceptionalism with respect to religion? The answer is not modernity but, as Himmelfarb puts it, different roads to modernity. In America, as in almost all the rest of the world, there is no felt need to choose between religion and modernity. On the contrary, the relation between the two is benign if not mutually reinforcing. Needless to say, this is not the view that prevails in the more Europeanized sectors of America's intellectual class.

To be sure, religion in America is frequently of the type that sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls "Golden Rule Christianity"—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This takes the edge off doctrinal and denominational disputes, and it can be understood as what Robert Bellah and others have called America's "civil religion." It is the source of the disputed virtue of

tolerance, which, in the eyes of more orthodox Christians, is often decried as religious indifference—though it also makes possible the near-unanimous support for such national identity-markers as “In God We Trust” and “One Nation Under God.” That support depends in large part on not inquiring too closely, and certainly not in a publicly aggressive manner, into the nature of the God affirmed.

Superficial critics of “Golden Rule Christianity” routinely deride it as superficial and a very poor substitute for what they propose as “authentic Christianity.” It should not, I think, be treated so dismissively. You can do a lot worse than the Golden Rule as a maxim in support of social peace and cooperation. More important, most Americans do not center their spiritual lives on contemplating the national motto or the Pledge of Allegiance. For that, they have churches and synagogues—the bearers of much thicker religious traditions. This does not have to do, at least in the first place, with the distinction between public and private. Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, and Catholics are publicly what they are. Indeed, belonging to a church is a mark of public acceptability, as is evident in numerous studies showing how immigrants quickly become more religiously affiliated in America than they were in their home country.

In this religio-cultural circumstance, Americans typically live at two levels of religious identity and affirmation. One is national (“In God We Trust”). The other, more deeply personal and communal, is lived in “the church of your choice.” This is an experienced choice, and is thus a facet of modernity that is difficult to avoid in the American situation. In the sociological jargon, our religious connection is elective rather than ascribed. Even with those churches, such as the Catholic and Orthodox, that have a deep ecclesiology of being sacramentally incorporated into the Body of Christ and thus being more chosen than choosing, the need for choice and repeated choice is the norm. A tradition chosen is different from a tradition into which one is born and by which one is defined. A choice can always, at least hypothetically, be reversed. This is obviously in tension with the self-understanding of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, but it is the American religious circumstance.

H. Richard Niebuhr wrote that the American contribution to ecclesiology was to add, to the European religious types of church and sect, the phenomenon of the denomination. A denomination is an elective association that assumes the appurtenances of the (upper-case) Church. The Catholic and Orthodox churches do not understand themselves to be denominations but the Church of Jesus Christ rightly ordered through time. For Catholics and Orthodox, one understands oneself to be baptized, and not usually by choice, into that one expression of the one Church. It is true that people also say they were “baptized Episcopalian” or “baptized Methodist.” But that is a matter of institutional identity or even tribal loyalty rather than of a coherent ecclesiology, since other churches do not claim to be what the Catholic and Orthodox churches claim to be.

The European difference is most starkly posed by the French experience. The British sociologist David Martin contends that the absence of a successful Reformation in France set the stage for a brutal power struggle between religion and the state. By a “successful Reformation,” he means chiefly a process of declericalization in which the Church is prepared to make an accommodation with the rising ambitions of the state along the lines of the “separation of church and state” in America. Grace Davie speaks of “the two protagonists in the struggle that dominates French

history: on the one hand, an unreconstructed and hegemonic church and, on the other, a state that claims for itself moral as well as political authority. The ascendancy of one implies the decline of the other. This is a zero-sum game.” It is the zero-sum game that resulted in the victory of the state reflected in the French notion of *laïcité*, which is a harder version of what in America has been called the naked public square—public life under the control of the state and stripped of religious or religiously grounded references.

Of course, in the real world there are no pure types. The connections between modernity and choice, in both Europe and America, result in a pick-and-mix approach to religion. The French sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger employs the term *bricolage*—which can be translated as “tinkering,” as when a child assembles and reassembles the pieces of a Tinker Toy set or a Lego game. Among Catholics, this is referred to pejoratively as “cafeteria Catholicism.” The American scholar Robert Wuthnow calls the phenomenon “patchwork religion.”

A big difference between Europeans and Americans, however, is that the former usually do their tinkering in a private and unorganized manner, while Americans, with their propensity for organizing and association, are more likely to play *bricolage* within existing religious institutions, or to start yet another denomination. This is closely related to the way in which people say they are “spiritual but not religious.” They resist taking their religion as a package deal, so to speak, insisting that it be tailored to what they describe as their “spiritual needs.” This pattern is prominent among both Catholics and Protestants, as is evident in the increasing number of Catholics who church shop for a parish of their preference, and the growing number of renewal movements, such as Opus Dei, Regnum Christi, and the Neocatechumenal Way. It should be noted that these and other movements are also very much at the center of Catholic renewal in European countries, not least of all in France.

In addition to the idea of “believing without belonging,” Davie also speaks of “vicarious religion.” This is evident in the ways that Europeans view the religiously committed as substitutes or surrogates in practicing the religion that they generally favor but do not want, for whatever reason, to practice themselves. They do not want to be personally involved in the church but want it to be there in time of need (usually associated with death and dying) or as an institution of moral continuity in the society. For instance, in Germany people pay 8 percent of their income tax to the support of the church, which, given tax rates in Germany, can be a sizable sum. They can opt out of the system by registering themselves *konfessionslos*—but the interesting thing is that most people do not.

“Vicarious religion” also helps explain the death of mainline Protestantism in this country, which was recently addressed by Joseph Bottum in these pages (“The Death of Protestant America: A Political Theory of the Protestant Mainline,” August/September 2008). Fifty years ago it was thought to be a question of great public moment when an Episcopal bishop such as James Pike publicly denied the existence of hell, heaven, or of God himself.

The Episcopal Church was undoubtedly the culturally elite church of the Protestant Establishment, and people who themselves had little interest in heaven, hell, or God felt themselves betrayed when it failed to do its vicarious duty in upholding what Christians are supposed to believe. Establishment Protestantism was failing to do its duty. It was letting down

the side, with unforeseen consequences for the society as a whole, and that worried people who expected the churches to do their believing for them.

Of course, there were many others who celebrated the mainline collapse as liberation from what is derisively called traditional morality. Fifty years later, it is hard to find anyone in America, apart from spiritually inclined gay activists and their allies in the media, who thinks that what is happening in the Episcopal Church has a serious bearing on the future of the country.

Vicarious religion is different in Britain. Most sociologists addressing the secularization issue depict Britain as being somewhere midway between the European and the American situations. But England today, and Scotland historically, has a long tradition of an officially established church. Americans are frequently puzzled by the way in which an affirmation of heresy or virtual apostasy by a bishop of the Church of England can still raise an enormous media ruckus in Britain. After all, it has been more than a half century since Church of England bishops have been writing sympathetically about “the death of God” and other theological frivolities. And yet, perverse episcopal eruptions still generate great public controversy, with everybody getting into the act, including professed atheists (who form upward of 20 percent of the population, as compared with 5 percent in America).

Davie’s idea of vicarious religion is useful. One notes in passing that some have suggested that the death of the Protestant mainline in this country might be succeeded by the ascendancy of Catholicism as the country’s establishment religion. That suggestion could be tested by the public reaction if a few Catholic bishops publicly repudiated what are understood to be key articles of faith or, for instance, attempted to ordain women to the priesthood. Unlike the Church of England, however, the Catholic Church is under international control and not a national property. In fact, there is still a substantial part of the population that is not sure the Catholic Church really belongs here at all. The media treatment of the sex-abuse crisis, beginning in 2002, depicted it as entirely an internal problem of the Church with few, if any, implications for the larger society.

That having been said, however, vicarious religion is alive and well in America. There are undoubtedly many non-Catholics, and also lapsed Catholics—or, as some cleverly say, “collapsed Catholics”—who would be greatly disturbed if the Church failed to keep up the side by continuing to teach what they are not sure they believe, or are sure they do not believe. A Jewish friend remarks, “‘The Catholic Church is the church we mean when we say *Church*.’ If it goes, that’s the whole game.” It is not as it is in England, where the nation pays the church to do its vicarious religion, but somebody has to maintain standards, and the Catholic Church in America is the chief, maybe the only, candidate for the job. That at least is how some view the convergence of the role of vicarious religion between Europe and America.

Yet another way of thinking about secularization is described as the move “from obligation to consumption.” In Europe, it is said, religious institutions are like public utilities. Like gas or electrical utilities, they are maintained for all but not all are expected to use them equally. Closely connected is the rational-choice theory advocated by Rodney Stark and others. These are interesting heuristic ideas that help to joggle the mind but may be of limited intellectual utility in understanding the dynamics of secularization. America is presumably the preeminent “consumer

society.” One might say that Americans typically “consume” more religion than do Europeans, but how far do you get by asking, “How much religion have you consumed this week?” Especially when the religion in play is Christianity, which emphasizes giving rather than getting. As in worship and in love of God and neighbor.

According to rational-choice theory, state-subsidized European churches are overstuffed with bureaucrats and professionals who live off the establishment, whereas American churches are subjected to the rigors of the marketplace. Thus Europeans view their churches as public utilities rather than, as in America, rival companies. In the language of Walter McDougall, that intrepid historian of this country, Americans are, even in religion, a “nation of hustlers.” (Also in the good sense of *hustler*, he adamantly insists.) Yet others have suggested that America is more vibrantly religious not because Americans are necessarily more religious but because Americans are simply more sociable. As almost everybody since Tocqueville has underscored, Americans have a penchant for association and the building of voluntary associations. Europeans are—and this goes back centuries—more inclined to let the state or other authorities make the important decisions for them. This might be viewed as the “vicarious authority” dimension of “vicarious - religion.”

José Casanova of Georgetown University pushes the question back further, arguing that there is no one thing properly called *secularization*. Secularization theory, he says, is composed of “three very different, uneven, and unintegrated propositions.” First, there is *secularization* understood as differentiation, in which secular spheres of society are increasingly distinguished from religious institutions and norms. Then there is what most people probably mean by *secularization*: a decline in religious beliefs and practices. Finally, there is *secularization* as the marginalization of religion, pushing it almost totally into the private sphere of life. While the first and the third of these may seem pretty much the same thing, it is surely true that discovering what people actually believe and why they believe it is not as susceptible to the kinds of structural analyses of which sociologists are fond.

The authors of *Religious America, Secular Europe?* seem at points to be curiously favorable to the more unitary government school systems of Europe, where, unlike America, “religion” or “world religions” is a staple in the curriculum. The result, they suggest, is that controversial questions such as creationism, intelligent design, and sexual morality are taught in their proper educational slot (“religion”) rather than being allowed to disrupt the educational curriculum. This is unpersuasive. As with religious-studies departments in American universities replacing departments of theology, the study of religion in general is a poor substitute for the study of religion that is believed and lived in the particular. Even if the Supreme Court permitted religion to be taught in American government schools, a following of the European pattern would seem to be but a further instance of the secularization that Casanova describes as differentiation and marginalization.

Here again the difference between public utility and rival firms is pertinent. In America, the rival firms in the religious formation of children are the home, the churches, and explicitly religious schools. I expect that serious studies focused on this question would demonstrate that the American way of competition better serves religious vitality and, not incidentally, the pluralism that most consider a strength of this society. The “separation of church and state” is often taken

to absurd extremes, but, in removing the teaching of religion from the public utility that is the government school system, it is not without its blessings. The absurd extremes typically involve the exclusion of any favorable reference to a particular religion, especially if it is to a majority religion, which is presumed to offend those of other religions or of no religion. The presumably offended are usually not consulted, it being decreed by the enforcers of secularism that they *should* be offended, even if they aren't.

And so the sociological arguments about the nature and causes of secularization go 'round and 'round. The political scientist John Madeley sees European exceptionalism as deeply rooted in the history of the continent. The history is that of a triad of church, state, and nation. "First, the church inherited part of its claim to universal dominion from the Roman Empire; then, after centuries of strain between religious *sacerdotum* and secular *regnum*, this claim was successfully tested and set aside by ever more powerful dynastic states and empires in the early-modern period; and, finally, from approximately 1800, the claim of the nation to be the unique font of sovereignty and political authority has progressively been pressed."

The triadic contest continues, however, in some peculiar ways. Jerry Z. Mueller has recently written in *Foreign Affairs* that the European Union is, in fact, the triumph of nationalism, with each nationally defined member state provided security for its national self-expression without the dangers of going to war with another European state. In Poland, it is hard to differentiate religion, state, and nation, since the story of Poland is the story of Catholicism, and its existence has depended—and some would say still depends—on that solidarity of identity. In Finland, unlike most European countries, almost all children are baptized in the official Lutheran Church. Otherwise, in terms of professed belief and practice, Finland is not so very unlike other European countries. Does baptism signify incorporation into the Finnish nation or incorporation into the Body of Christ? Or both? And in post-Soviet Russia, the Russian state and Holy Orthodoxy are forging a single sovereignty that, logically enough, is aggressively hostile to religious minorities. Are these instances of secularization?

In 2004 there was a grand brouhaha over whether the preamble of the European Constitution should include a specific reference to Christianity. Both John Paul the Great and the present pope, among many others, entered the ring. Grace Davie says the controversy turned on the difference over whether a preamble is to speak of the past or the future. She writes, "If a preamble is concerned with historical fact, then the reference must be specific—Christianity has had a huge and lasting influence in the formation of Europe. It is willful to pretend otherwise. But if a preamble is an inspiration for the future, the answers might well be different, or at least there are different questions to consider. Much of the confusion surrounding this highly controversial issue lay in the fact that Europeans omitted to consider the precise nature of the preamble that they were trying to write." If they were not confused, and if they did intend a preamble addressing the future, would Christianity have been mentioned? Davie does not say, although it would seem to have a strong bearing on what is meant by the secularization of Europe.

Jürgen Habermas, among the most influential of European social theorists and a person with whom Benedict XVI has entered into public conversation, has written: "Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy. . . . We

continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter.” Needless to say, this was not the view of those who managed the campaign for the European Constitution.

I have omitted in this essay, mainly because it is omitted in the literature under discussion, some more melancholy accounts of the European circumstance—as set forth in the work of Bernard Lewis, George Weigel, Bat Ye’or, and, at a much more popular level, Mark Steyn. They depict Europe as a dying continent: dying culturally, spiritually, and, perhaps most decisively, demographically. The nations of Europe have a birthrate far below replacement level, and, according to demographers, many have passed the point of no return, meaning that it is nearly impossible, from a statistical viewpoint, that native populations will maintain their numbers into the next generation or two. This situation is exacerbated by the fast-growing number of unassimilated and culturally aggressive Muslim immigrants, leading some writers to warn that Europe will, in the not-too-distant future, be replaced by “Eurabia.” Most of these writers see a strong connection between secularization and demographic disaster. Without a deeply grounded—usually meaning a religiously grounded—hope for the future, the case for having children is gravely weakened.

The social scientists writing in *Religious America, Secular Europe?* do refer, usually in passing, to the Muslim and demographic challenges, but they seem to believe that, one way or another, Europe will muddle through. The record of history suggests that there is a great deal to be said on behalf of muddling through, but this apparent insouciance is less than entirely plausible.

Nonetheless, the arguments surveyed in the book and related literature are an encouraging sign of fresh thinking in the social sciences about the nature and causes of secularization. It is not likely that grand systematic schemes like those of Comte or Weber will emerge out of these debates, which is perhaps just as well. What is emerging is a renewed and thoroughly multicultural understanding of *homo religiosus*—the creature in the gutter who, despite every effort, cannot help but see in the muck the reflection of the stars and thus recognize (in the fine phrase of Berger’s) “signals of transcendence.”

The important task of a renewed sociology of religion is to help us understand how, both individually and in social structures, *homo religiosus* accommodates that irrepressible vision within all the other things that he knows to be true and important.