PART I

Understanding Secularization

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The Secularization Debate

THE SEMINAL SOCIAL thinkers of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud – all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society.[1] They were far from alone; ever since the Age of the Enlightenment, leading figures in philosophy, anthropology, and psychology have postulated that theological superstitions, symbolic liturgical rituals, and sacred practices are the product of the past that will be outgrown in the modern era. The death of religion was the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century; indeed it has been regarded as *the* master model of sociological inquiry, where secularization was ranked with bureaucratization, rationalization, and urbanization as the key historical revolutions transforming medieval agrarian societies into modern industrial nations. As C. Wright Mills summarized this process: "*Once the world was filled with the sacred – in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm.*"[2]

During the last decade, however, this thesis of the slow and steady death of religion has come under growing criticism; indeed, secularization theory is currently experiencing the most sustained challenge in its long history.

Critics point to multiple indicators of religious health and vitality today, ranging from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States to the emergence of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs.[3] After reviewing these developments, Peter L. Berger, one of the foremost advocates of secularization during the 1960s, recanted his earlier claims: "*The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken.*"[4] In a fierce and sustained critique, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke suggest it is time to bury the secularization thesis: "*After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper 'requiescat in pace.'*"[5]

Were Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Marx completely misled in their beliefs about religious decline in industrialized societies? Was the predominant sociological view during the twentieth century totally misguided? Has the debate been settled? We think not. Talk of burying the secularization theory is premature. The critique relies too heavily on selected anomalies and focuses too heavily on the United States (which happens to be a striking deviant case) rather than comparing systematic evidence across a broad range of rich and poor societies.[6] We need to move beyond studies of Catholic and Protestant church attendance in Europe (where attendance is falling) and the United States (where attendance remains stable) if we are to understand broader trends in religious vitality in churches, mosques, shrines, synagogues, and temples around the globe.

There is no question that the traditional secularization thesis needs updating. It is obvious that religion has not disappeared from the world, nor does it seem likely to do so. Nevertheless, the concept of secularization captures an important part of what is going on. This book develops a revised version of secularization theory that emphasizes the extent to which people have a sense of existential security – that is, the feeling that survival is secure enough that it can be taken for granted. We build on key elements of traditional sociological accounts while revising others. We believe that the importance of religiosity persists most strongly among vulnerable populations, especially those living in poorer nations, facing personal survival-threatening risks. We argue that feelings of vulnerability to physical, societal, and personal risks are a key factor driving religiosity

and we demonstrate that the process of secularization – a systematic erosion of religious practices, values, and beliefs – has occurred most clearly among the most prosperous social sectors living in affluent and secure postindustrial nations.

Secularization is a tendency, not an iron law. One can easily think of striking exceptions, such as Osama bin Laden, who is (or was) extremely rich and fanatically religious. But when we go beyond anecdotal evidence such as this, we find that the overwhelming bulk of evidence points in the opposite direction: people who experience ego-tropic risks during their formative years (posing direct threats to themselves and their families) or socio-tropic risks (threatening their community) tend to be far more religious than those who grow up under safer, comfortable, and more predictable conditions. In relatively secure societies, the remnants of religion have not died away; in surveys most Europeans still express formal belief in God, or identify themselves as Protestants or Catholics on official forms. But in these societies the importance and vitality of religion, its ever-present influence on how people live their daily lives, has gradually eroded.

The most persuasive evidence about secularization in rich nations concerns values and behavior: the critical test is what people say is important to their lives and what they actually *do*. As this book will document, during the twentieth century in nearly all postindustrial nations – ranging from Canada and Sweden to France, Britain, and Australia – official church records report that where once the public flocked to Sabbath worship services, the pews are now almost deserted. The surveys monitoring European churchgoing during the last fifty years confirm this phenomenon. The United States remains exceptional in this regard, for reasons explained in detail later in Chapter 4.

Despite trends in secularization occurring in rich nations, this does not mean that the world as a whole has become less religious. As this book will demonstrate:

1. The publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past fifty years. Nevertheless,
2. The world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population.

Though these two propositions may initially seem contradictory, they are not. As we will show, the fact that the first proposition is true helps

account for the second – because secularization and human development have a powerful negative impact on human fertility rates. Practically all of the countries in which secularization is most advanced show fertility rates far below the replacement level – while societies with traditional religious orientations have fertility rates that are two or three times the replacement level. They contain a growing share of the world's population. The expanding gap between sacred and secular around the globe has important consequences for cultural change, society, and world politics.

Part I uses this theoretical framework to develop and test a series of propositions, demonstrating how religiosity is systematically related to (i) levels of societal modernization, human security, and economic inequality; (ii) the predominant type of religious culture in any nation; (iii) generational shifts in values; (iv) different social sectors; and (v) patterns of demography, fertility rates, and population change. Part II analyzes detailed regional case studies comparing religiosity in the United States and Western Europe, the Muslim world, and post-Communist Europe. Part III then examines the social and political consequences of secularization, and its ramifications for cultural and moral values, religious organizations and social capital, and voting support for religious parties. The conclusion summarizes the key findings and highlights the demographic patterns generating the widening gap over religion around the world.

This study draws on a massive base of new evidence generated by the four waves of the World Values Survey executed from 1981 to 2001. The World Values Survey has carried out representative national surveys in almost eighty societies, covering all of the world's major faiths. We also examine other evidence concerning religiosity from multiple sources, including Gallup International polls, the International Social Survey Program, and Eurobarometer surveys. At one level, there is nothing novel or startling about our claims. A mainstream tradition in sociology, anthropology, history, and social psychology has long theorized that cross-cultural differences in religiosity exist in many societies worldwide. But traditional secularization theory has come under powerful and sustained criticism from many influential scholars during the past decade. Systematic survey evidence comparing cultural attitudes toward religion across many developing nations remains scattered and inconclusive, with most studies limited to a handful of affluent postindustrial societies and established democracies in Western Europe and North America. As well as reconceptualizing and refining secularization theory, our study examines the wealth of survey evidence for religiosity from a broader perspective and in a wider range of countries than ever before.

Traditional Theories of Secularization

The most influential strands of thought shaping the debate over secularization can be broadly subdivided into two perspectives. On the one hand, *demand-side* theories, which focus "bottom up" on the mass public, suggest that as societies industrialize, almost regardless of what religious leaders and organizations attempt, religious habits will gradually erode, and the public will become indifferent to spiritual appeals. By contrast, the *supply-side* theory, which focuses "top-down" on religious organizations, emphasizes that the public demand for religion is constant and any cross-national variations in the vitality of spiritual life are the product of its supply in religious markets.[7] Supply-siders argue that religious organizations and leaders play a strategic role in aggressively building and maintaining congregations, essentially suggesting that "if you build a church, people will come." After outlining these alternative accounts, we conclude that, although the original theory of secularization was flawed in certain regards, it was correct in the demand-side perspective. We then summarize our alternative theory of secularization, based on conditions of existential security, which is developed fully throughout this study.

The Rational Weltanschauung: The Loss of Faith

The idea that the rise of a rational worldview has undermined the foundations of faith in the supernatural, the mysterious, and the magical predated the thought of Max Weber, but it was strongly influenced by his work in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) and in *Economics and Society* (1933).[8] Many leading sociologists advanced the rationalist argument farther during the 1960s and 1970s, foremost among them Peter Berger, David Martin, and Brian Wilson.[9]

In this perspective, the era of the Enlightenment generated a rational view of the world based on empirical standards of proof, scientific knowledge of natural phenomena, and technological mastery of the universe. Rationalism was thought to have rendered the central claims of the Church implausible in modern societies, blowing away the vestiges of superstitious dogma in Western Europe. The loss of faith was thought to cause religion to unravel, eroding habitual churchgoing practices and observance of ceremonial rituals, eviscerating the social meaning of denominational identities, and undermining active engagement in faith-based organizations and support for religious parties in civic society.

Science and religion could confront each other directly in a zero-sum game where scientific explanations undermined the literal interpretation of Biblical teachings from Genesis 1 and 2, exemplified by the Darwinian theory of evolution that challenged ideas of special creation by God.[10] Even more importantly, scientific knowledge, its applications through technology and engineering, and the expansion of mass education could have a broader and more diffuse social impact by ushering in a new cultural era. Following the European enlightenment, rational calculation was thought to have gradually undercut the foundations of core metaphysical beliefs. The idea of the mysterious was regarded by Weber as something to be conquered by human reason and mastered by the products of technology, subject to logical explanations found in physics, biology, and chemistry rather than to divine forces outside this world. The dazzling achievements of medicine, engineering, and mathematics – as well as the material products generated by the rise of modern capitalism, technology, and manufacturing industry during the nineteenth century – emphasized and reinforced the idea of mankind's control of nature.[11] Personal catastrophes, contagious diseases, disastrous floods, and international wars, once attributed to supernatural forces, primitive magic, and divine intervention, or to blind fate, came to be regarded as the outcome of predictable and preventable causes. Priests, ministers, popes, rabbis, and mullahs appealing to divine authority became only one source of knowledge in modern societies, and not necessarily the most important or trusted one in many dimensions of life, when competing with the specialized expertise, certified training, and practical skills of professional economists, physicists, physicians, or engineers.[12] The division of church and state, and the rise of secular-rational bureaucratic states and representative governments, displaced the rule of spiritual leaders, ecclesiastical institutions, and hereditary rulers claiming authority from God. As Bruce summarized this argument:

> Industrialization brought with it a series of social changes – the fragmentation of the life-world, the decline of community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness – that together made religion less arresting and less plausible than it had been in pre-modern societies. That is the conclusion of most social scientists, historians, and church leaders in the Western world.[13]

The core Weberian thesis concerns the impact of the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution occurring many centuries earlier, so it remains difficult to scrutinize systematically with any contemporary empirical evidence. But if a rational worldview generates widespread skepticism about the existence of God and belief in the metaphysical, then those societies

that express most confidence in science might be expected to prove least religious; in fact, as documented in Chapter 3, we find the reverse.

Functional Evolution: The Loss of Purpose

A related explanation is offered by theories of functional differentiation in industrialized societies, predicting the loss of the central role of religious institutions in society. This argument originated from the seminal work of Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), and by the 1950s the functionalist perspective had become the predominant sociological view.[14] Contemporary theorists who developed this account further include Steve Bruce, Thomas Luckman, and Karel Dobbelaere.[15]

Functionalists emphasize that religion is not simply a system of beliefs and ideas (as Weber suggests); it is also a system of actions involving formal rituals and symbolic ceremonies to mark the major passages of birth, marriage, and death, as well as the regular seasonal celebrations. These rituals played an essential function for society as a whole, Durkheim suggested, by sustaining social solidarity and cohesion, maintaining order and stability, thereby generating collective benefits. Durkheim argued that industrialized societies are characterized by functional differentiation, where specialized professionals and organizations, dedicated to healthcare, education, social control, politics, and welfare, replaced most of the tasks once carried out exclusively in Western Europe by monasteries, priests, and parish churches. Faith-based voluntary and charitable organizations in the medieval era – the alms-house, the seminary, and the hospice – were displaced in Europe by the expansion of the welfare state during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The growth of the state created publicly funded schools, healthcare, and welfare safety nets to care for the unemployed, the elderly, and the destitute. Stripped of their core social purposes, Durkheim predicted that the residual spiritual and moral roles of religious institutions would gradually waste away in industrial societies, beyond the traditional formal rites of births, marriages, and death, and the observance of special holidays.

The theory of evolutionary functionalism became the popular orthodoxy in the sociology of religion during the postwar decades. Jagodzinski and Dobbelaere, for example, proposed such an explanation to account for the shrinking church-going congregations in Western Europe: *"All the empirical evidence in this chapter is compatible with the assumption that functional rationalization related to functional differentiation, detraditionalization, and ensuring*

individualization have a cumulative impact on the decline of church involvement, especially among the post-war generation."[16] If this thesis is correct, one implication is that church congregations should have fallen further and fastest in affluent societies that have developed extensive welfare states, such as in Sweden, the Netherlands, and France – and indeed much of the evidence is consistent with this account.[17]

Yet in recent decades growing numbers of critics have expressed reservations about the core claims of the functionalist version of societal development. An erosion of the *social* purpose of the church through functional differentiation does not necessarily mean that the core moral and spiritual roles of religious institutions are diminished or lost – indeed, they could become more important. Functionalist theory, which dominated the literature on social development during the 1950s and 1960s, gradually fell out of intellectual fashion; the idea that all societies progress along a single deterministic pathway of socioeconomic development toward a common end-point – the modern secular democratic state – came under increasing challenge in anthropology, comparative sociology, and comparative politics from a multicultural perspective emphasizing that communities, societies, and states experience diverse forms of change.[18] Rather than an inevitable and steady loss of spiritual faith or purpose as societies modernize, critics argue that more complex historical and cross-country patterns are evident, where religion rises and falls in popularity at different periods in different societies, fueled by specific factors, such as the charisma of particular spiritual leaders, the impact of contingent events, or the mobilization of faith-based movements. To support this argument, observers point to a resurgence of religiosity evident in the success of Islamic parties in Pakistan, the popularity of Evangelicalism in Latin America, outbreaks of ethno-religious bloodshed in Nigeria, and international conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of the events of 9/11.[19] At the same time, elsewhere religious faith may flounder, and the church may experience a crisis of mass support, due to contingent events and local circumstances, such as the American public's reaction toward sex abuse scandals among the Roman Catholic clergy, or deep divisions within the international Anglican Church leadership over the issue of homosexuality. Hence Andrew Greeley argues that diverse patterns of religiosity exist today, even among affluent European nations, rather than observing any consistent and steady conversion toward atheism or agnosticism, or any loss of faith in God.[20]

The demand-side accounts of secularization initiated by the work of Weber and Durkheim have been subjected to massive intellectual battering

during the last decade. After reviewing the historical evidence of church-going in Europe, Rodney Stark concludes that secularization is a pervasive myth, based on failed prophecies and ideological polemic, unsupported by systematic data: "*The evidence is clear that claims about a major decline in religious participation [in Europe] are based in part on very exaggerated perceptions of past religiousness. Participation may be very low today in many nations, but not because of modernization; therefore the secularization thesis is irrelevant.*"[21] For Jeffrey Hadden, the assumptions within secularization constitute a doctrine or dogma more than a well-tested rigorous theory: "*a taken-for-granted ideology rather than a systematic set of interrelated propositions.*"[22] He argues that benign neglect, rather than confirming evidence, kept the claims of secularization intact for so long. The idea that religion would shrink and eventually vanish was a product of the social and cultural milieu of its time, fitting the evolutionary functional model of modernization. The emergence of new spiritual movements, and the way that religion remains entangled in politics, suggests, Hadden believes, that secularization is not happening as predicted. He argues that those who claim that secularization has occurred have exaggerated and romanticized the depth of religious practices in the European past and also simultaneously underestimated the power and popularity of religious movements in the present era, exemplified by an evangelical revival in Latin America and New Age spirituality in Western Europe. The body of scholarship that arose during the last decade has generated a vigorous debate about the contemporary vitality of religious life, raising important questions about the links that were assumed to connect the process of modernization with secularization.

The Theory of Religious Markets: The Loss of Competition

Traditional secularization theory is now widely challenged, but no single theoretical framework has yet won general acceptance to replace it. The supply-side school of rational choice theorists that emerged in the early 1990s, although remaining controversial, provides the most popular alternative. Indeed, Warner claims that this represents a "new paradigm," as the model has stimulated numerous studies during the last decade.[23] The religious market model disregards the public's "demand" for religion, which is assumed to be constant, but focuses instead on how conditions of religious freedom, and the work of competing religious institutions, actively generate its "supply." The principal proponents include, among others, Roger