

nations by Gallup and similar organizations. Another resource, the evangelical-authored *World Christian Encyclopedia*, tabulates national census data on religion, though faith communities' official membership statistics are sometimes contradicted by surveys designed to capture actual opinions among church members.

The twentieth century can be seen as a grand culture war, a vast, historically unique societal experiment in which agnostics, absolute atheists, and other nonreligious ballooned to about one billion, a sixth of the world's population. Driven largely by conversion of believers, this vast expansion in unbelief—a multi-hundredfold upsurge in absolute numbers, and a fiftyfold increase in percentage of population in one long life span—far outstrips the growth of any major faith in the twentieth century, and probably in history.

Current Situation. Believers in the supernatural belong to some ten thousand significant sects, most aligned within ten major organized religions. Christianity's percentage of the population has remained stagnant overall, at about one in three. Christians are divided among some thirty-four thousand denominations, one of which—Roman Catholicism—claims almost half of all Christians. Most demographic losses among Christians represent conversions to nontheism rather than to any of the other major religions. Among the ten major religions, only Islam has seen major relative growth, moving from about 12 percent of the global population in 1900 to nearly 20 percent today, largely due to population growth rather than conversion. The third-largest faith, Hinduism, claims about a seventh of the global population. Traditional animists, New Agers, and various pagans make up about a sixth of the world's people. In alarmed reaction to the fast growth of secularization, Abrahamic and Hindu fundamentalists mounted a resurgence in recent decades.

In general, rising levels of education and income correspond to higher rates of religious skepticism. For example, despite anomalously high religious belief in the United States (see below), most American scientists are nontheists; the degree of skepticism is highest among the most distinguished researchers. This pattern repeats at the level of nations: in most second and third world countries, rates of belief remain high and relatively little changed from the past. In these nations 80 to nearly 100 percent of survey respondents report remaining absolute believers and rate religion as very important in their lives. Even so, secularism has made gains. Among Latin American respondents, up to a third describe religion as only somewhat important. Fully a third of Turks are only somewhat religious, proof that a Muslim nation can experience significant secularization. Most interesting among the second world examples is South Korea, where only a quarter of respondents identify as strongly religious and a third report little interest, although few report none. Forty percent of South Korean respondents claimed to be agnostics and atheists.

DEMOGRAPHY OF UNBELIEF. Until the twentieth century all peoples were highly religious: supernatural belief was nearly universal and pervaded daily life. As late as 1900, AGNOSTICISM and absolute ATHEISM may have been held by only a few million persons, mainly intellectuals. Following the unprecedented growth in global communications and travel in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, many Western Christians presumed that their faith, then embraced by a third of the planet's population, would finally sweep the world in the twentieth century. This expectation inspired the evangelical Watchword movement. For their part, at the dawn of the twentieth century many nontheists thought the age of science would soon herald the end of mass faith. This expectation became known as the secularization hypothesis.

Which of these opposing visions has proven more accurate? The answer lies in a body of large-scale international surveys that recently sampled rates of belief and unbelief worldwide. During the 1990s, two massive studies, the International Social Survey Program—Religion I and II, measured religiosity in seventeen and thirty-three nations, respectively. The 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Project asked respondents in forty-four nations to rank religion's importance in their lives. The 2004 BBC/ICM survey of ten nations sought opinions on a number of issues bearing on religion. The results of these studies generally agree with polls conducted in single

Theism suffered severe losses under Communism. Contrary to Christian claims of a great post-Cold War revival, the percentage that reported considering religion very important remains in the mere teens in Russia, eastern Germany, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. Across this region half to three-quarters of respondents report limited or no interest in religion. In Russia some polls suggest high rates of religious interest and report that absolute belief in theism has doubled, but theists still constitute only a quarter of respondents and church attendance is low. A third of Russian respondents still identify as agnostics or absolute atheists. Meanwhile in eastern Germany, even after reunification fully half of respondents continue to express no interest in religion and profess to be agnostics and atheists. This is the highest reported incidence of unbelief in any democratic region. Still higher rates of disbelief may exist in China, which probably has the largest absolute number of nontheists, and in North Korea (though tempered by a bizarre superstitious aura surrounding the latter's fanatical leadership). In Vietnam just a quarter of the sample claim strong interest in religion, half report low or non-existent interest. In Islamic Uzbekistan, religious interest remains high among just a third of respondents; the same is true even in Poland, despite the cachet of Catholicism's role in helping to topple Communism.

Crisis in the West. Most striking is the crisis faced by organized religion in the west. During the last half of the twentieth century, all but one of the nineteen major prosperous developed democracies (the Western European nations, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan) experienced dramatic declines in religious belief and practice. Japan qualifies as among the most skeptical of first world democracies, with just 4 percent of respondents reporting "absolute" belief in God and fully a third self-identifying as agnostics and atheists. More than nine in ten Japanese respondents claim at most limited interest in religion; more than one in five report none whatever. In addition, rates of religious practice are low. No other democracy has so large a skeptical population in absolute terms. France exhibits even lower rates of religiosity, with a full third of respondents reporting no interest in religion, and four of ten identifying as agnostic or atheistic; the percentage reporting absolute belief in a creator is in the teens. Scandinavia, too, is a bastion of secularism, with absolute believers ranking in the teens, agnostics and atheists comprising a quarter to a third of respondents, and rates of religious practice at very low levels. Western Europe's Catholic nations are more theistic, yet even among Italians only a quarter report strong involvement in religion, while a third report little or none. Indeed half or more of Italians, Spaniards, and Irish hold no absolute belief in God. Taken as a bloc, only about one-quarter of the inhabitants of the secularized developed democracies describe themselves as absolute believers; an equal number report agnosticism or absolute atheism. In all of these coun-

tries, sizable majorities accept human descent from animals. In general, European Christianity is today generally liberal, with biblical literalists and "born-again" comprising marginalized minorities.

It is difficult to overstate the dire condition of organized religion in the secularized democracies (that is, all of them except the United States). In none does a majority of the populace report ardent belief in a divine Christ. Meanwhile atheists are openly elected to high office and in some cases control state churches; believers in such evangelical staples as the Rapture are thought to be daft. Churches that lack state support are experiencing financial crises to the point that many churches are being converted to nonreligious uses or are renting space to commercial enterprises. So powerful is this secularizing tide that a commission of the Church of England has proposed dropping ill-attended Sabbath services and concluded that the advent of modern lifestyles "coincides with the demise of Christendom." No lesser authority than Pope John Paul II labeled Scotland "heathen." So beleaguered is European Christianity that second and third world churches are dispatching missionaries back to Europe. No significant grassroots revival appears to be in prospect in any of the secularized developed democracies. Instead, overall trends in faith point downward; for example, the number of nontheists in France has nearly doubled over the last quarter century. Although alternative modes of spirituality, including evangelicalism, Buddhism, and the New Age movement, have replaced mainstream Christian observance for some, they are by no means popular enough to offset Christianity's broad decay, especially as increasingly large numbers abandon any interest whatever in the supernatural. Likewise, though many report belief in varied paranormal claims, their level of interest is usually superficial and idle. All in all, nontheism has won the culture war in Europe, and has done so remarkably quietly and with little effort or cost.

The American Exception. The culture war still rages in the United States; alone among first world democracies, this nation displays primitive rates of religiosity otherwise seen only in the second and third worlds. Nearly two-thirds of Americans absolutely believe in God and consider religion important in their lives; nine in ten are favorable to the existence of a higher power. Not only is the United States the only nation to combine material prosperity with high levels of faith, American Christianity is exceptionally conservative by Western standards. Four in ten US respondents self-identify as born-again, about a third claim to believe that the Bible is literally true, and almost half deny human evolution. End-time novels are best-sellers and religious-themed films are blockbusters, while the media celebrates a mythical reconciliation of science and faith.

This has not always been the American norm. Many of the nation's revered founders were non-Christian deists, skeptics of a divine Christ who probably could not be elected today. Church membership has risen fairly

steadily, climbing from less than one in five in revolutionary times to greater than three in five in the 1990s. In the latter third of the twentieth century, fundamentalism gained at the expense of less conservative Christian denominations. A Gallup analysis of multiple indicators concluded that US religiosity rose in the 1990s, reversing a long but modest decline during the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile, more than a third of Americans distrust unbelievers; 70 percent consider them unsuitable mates.

Yet US believers have a number of reasons for concern. Differing surveys place agnostics and atheists at 3 to 10 percent of the US population, making skeptics more numerous than American Jews or Mormons. American tolerance for unbelievers is growing. Lifestyles are increasingly secularized and liberalized: Sundays have largely become homogenized with the rest of the week, civil marriages are rising at the expense of religious ceremonies, and once-shocking "alternative" lifestyles and entertainment have become at least widely tolerated and frequently highly popular. Only a few percent of Americans live strict Bible-based lifestyles, and divorce rates remain high even among the born-again. Absolute God belief among Americans is already somewhat lower than typical in the third world—by inference, lower than it was in the American past. The percentage of those who absolutely believe in God, claim to be born-again, or accept literal descent from Adam and Eve has not risen for decades. A series of Gallup polls measured a consistent halving of claims of belief in the literal truth of the Bible, from nearly two-thirds in the 1960s to half that today. The most intriguing evidence comes from a growing body of surveys that consistently report declining rates of Bible reading, prayer, and church membership and attendance. Remarkably, Protestantism is quickly dropping from a significant majority down toward minority status, and Christianity as a whole is in proportional decline, from nearly 90 percent to about 75 percent. The surveys further indicate that the unchurched doubled during the 1990s, now comprising a quarter of the population; over the same period those who express no religious preference also doubled, in this case to a sixth of the total, having started from just a few percent a half century ago. Detachment from religious indoctrination leaves people further inclined toward disbelief, so the churches face a retention crisis. Also, most nonreligious persons are men, and most children pick up their religious beliefs from their fathers. That Southern Baptists are baptizing members at the same rate they did half a century ago when the population was half as large illustrates the faith-based recruitment crisis. In the 1940s and 1950s between 1 and 2 percent of Gallup respondents said they did not believe in God, and up to 98 percent did. In two 2005 Gallup surveys, combined agnostics and atheists were more than 5 and 9 percent of the samples. There is no question that nontheism, including explicit atheism and agnosticism, is growing in America

at the expense of faith, despite the strenuous work of the world's wealthiest religious industry.

Although high rates of religiosity are found over much of the globe, they are specific to third and second world nations and the aberrant United States. Among the remaining developed democracies, secularism is increasingly the standard. If not for influxes of characteristically religious second and third world immigrants, all of the developed democracies, including the United States, would be undergoing greater secularization.

Geographic Distribution of Religiosity. Geographically, devout Christianity is nearly extinct in its Middle Eastern home and has been largely abandoned in its historical European bastion; in the northern temperate zone, it is a strong majority phenomenon only in the United States. Christianity remains robust in much of Latin America, but is making major gains only in third world Africa, where it must compete with local animist beliefs. Two continents, Europe and Australia, can be considered wholly de-Christianized and secularized. Meanwhile, Islam continues to span the tropical Old World from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans; mass Hinduism remains limited to the Indian subcontinent.

Demographics and the Secularization Hypothesis. Although modernity has by no means annihilated supernaturalism, for the first time religion has been dealt major blows, especially in advanced nations, partially fulfilling the secularist hypothesis and greatly disappointing evangelicals. Refuted is the widely debated chapter in Stark and Finke's *Acts of Faith* titled "Secularization, R. I. P.," in which the two pioneering sociologists of religion derisively deny Western secularization, arguing that faith is competitively superior to its alternative. Also contradicted is the widely held view that most people are strongly genetically, psychologically, or spiritually predisposed toward supernatural beliefs. Quite the contrary, religious opinion stands exposed by the data as brittle and readily subject to abandonment. The demographics of unbelief verify the argument that ardent mass faith requires evangelical promulgation by a conservative religious propaganda industry, consistently fading in the face of secularized liberal religion. In contrast, mass secularization is so potent that it occurs by spontaneous individual conversion even in the face of large-scale proselytizing and despite the absence of any comparably extensive—or expensive—secularist "missionary" movement.

Put simply, encouraging the inherently rational disbelief in supernatural deities is many times more cost effective than is promoting belief in what cannot be shown to exist. Were nontheism as evangelical and well organized as religion, then faith would be much worse off than it already is.

The Foundation of Belief. The factors behind the secular revolution's great potency are numerous and complicated, but one causal factor is clearly critical above others. Rather than being based upon unquestioning faith as is often supposed, the belief of most reli-

gious individuals actually rests upon the notion that the universe and humanity must have been created by a greater intelligence. Until the early 1800s, science was seen as verifying natural theology, making denial of a creator difficult. Modern advances in geology, paleontology, cosmology, and evolutionary biology have largely eliminated the need for a creator in order to account for the state of the world. Deprived of its aura of physical necessity, supernatural belief can be recognized as mere unsubstantiated opinion and large numbers of people will simply abandon it. The better educated a person is in modern science, the more likely one is to make this rational decision (see DARWINISM).

The close negative correlation between the acceptance of human descent from animals and the existence of a creator in the developed democracies verifies the close inverse relationship between these factors. For instance, the Japanese report the strongest acceptance of evolution *and* the weakest belief in a creator; Americans display the opposite pattern. There is no documented case in which a prosperous democracy's population is both well-versed in evolutionary science and high in theistic belief and practice, or vice versa—and it is unlikely that any exists. Not well understood is whether acceptance of evolution leads to loss in faith, or the reverse, or—as seems most likely—that the two work together in a feedback system. The importance of advancing science in undermining faith cannot be overstated. Without it, the other contributing factors would be irrelevant.

Some of these other factors themselves depend upon science and technology. For example, the dramatic social changes of the industrial age have driven secularization. Two centuries ago, most people lived lives not much different from those of their ancient ancestors, with juvenile mortality rates of 50 percent, short adult life spans, and, by modern standards, almost ubiquitous poverty. Today, particularly in the first world, vast numbers of people travel the world almost at will, live in relative comfort and opulence, and enjoy abundant food and advanced medical care. Childhood death is rare and people regularly live into their seventies or eighties. Birth control and safe abortion allow sex to occur outside of sanctified marriage without the complication of pregnancy. The masses enjoy unprecedented access to a previously unimaginable variety of entertainment and information media. As the Church of England commission has acknowledged, living like pampered and protected demigods has undoubtedly emboldened millions to discard their beliefs in archaic myths.

The postwar collapse of religion in Europe's secular developed democracies has been associated with dramatic rises in both prosperity and education. Even Ireland threw off centuries of Catholic domination simultaneously with a technology-driven economic boom.

Historical Factors Influencing American Exceptionalism. While the collapse of ardent supernaturalism

in virtually all prosperous democracies is readily explained, its survival—so far—in the United States is more puzzling. Historical patterns may play a role. Even after its Christianization, much of Europe, Scandinavia in particular, may not have been as devout as previously supposed. Disastrous events such as the Black Death, the Crusades, and extended religious wars combined with the impact of the Renaissance and Enlightenment to weaken faith further. Another possible factor may have been the steady export of religious zealots to North America, which in turn might explain why the young United States was markedly more theistic than Europe. The strongly theistic Scots-Irish who have greatly influenced southern and midwestern culture may be especially important. Stark and Finke support the hypothesis that separation of church and state created a religious free market in which American churches and clerics had to compete for adherents, in marked contrast to a Europe dominated by state churches whose clerics felt little need to work at retaining communicants. But this hypothesis does little to explain the thorough secularization of Australia and New Zealand, where relations between church and state resembled those in the United States. Thorough secularization has also occurred in democracies in which state and church were sundered long ago, such as Canada, in which religion was disestablished in the mid-1800s.

Historical Factors Influencing European Secularism. Vatican and clerical corruption, ranging from the "Irish Gulag" of juvenile slave laundry facilities to long-term ties with organized crime, has contributed to the collapse of European Catholicism. Likewise Catholic corruption may encourage declining piety in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Looking back, the shock of World War I severely damaged the concept of divine-right monarchy and encouraged the first major decline in European religion. The economic collapse of the 1930s, followed by the catastrophes of World War II and the Holocaust, delivered further blows to a Christianity that had signally failed to provide either the moral guidance or the divine intervention that might have been hopes to keep the historical stronghold of Christianity from descending into horrific chaos. Meanwhile atheism gained favor, in part because skeptics were conspicuous among opponents of fascism.

More recently, the continued failings of faith have continued to discourage belief in democracies more attuned to the international situation than America. For example, the most Christian African nations are strife-torn Rwanda and the Congo, where 80 to 95 percent are ardent believers. Violent Christian terrorist military organizations such as Zambia's Lumpa Church and Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army are committing mass atrocities of extreme brutality. When Baptist lay preacher Charles Taylor stepped down from his blood-drenched rule of Liberia, he cited God at length.

The Impact of World War II. The effect of World

War II on religious belief was most direct in Japan. In what may be history's single most effective blow against any faith, following the cataclysm an apologetic emperor admitted that he was not divine, instantly creating a nation of skeptics. Also affected by one person was post-World War I Turkey, where the antireligious Atatürk initiated a wave of secularism.

The American experience with the two world wars was quite different: they served as economic boosters, raising the country's global power and status while leaving it relatively unscathed, evidence to many of divine favor. Conservative America widely perceived the subsequent Cold War as an epic struggle between Godless communism and God-fearing democracy, an attitude that has now been transplanted more or less intact into rhetoric of a struggle between Christian righteousness and virulent Islam.

US Political and Religious Conservatism: A Vicious Cycle. The traditional historical, cultural, and political conservatism of the United States buttressed the popularity of conservative religions, which tended to exhibit the high levels of ardor needed to perpetuate their mythology. In turn, religious conservatism encouraged cultural-political conservatism in a classic feedback system. In particular, the common failure of US public and private school systems properly to teach evolutionary science is driven by the conservative religious community—nearly four in ten science teachers favor teaching creationism—which then benefits from the antievolutionism that favors conservative Christianity. It is no accident that the most conservative prosperous democracy is the most religious and vice versa, the one depending greatly on the other.

It is correspondingly ironic that the bulk of anti-Darwinist religious conservatives so ardently support free-market capitalism, which is strongly socially Darwinistic. High economic disparity results in higher US rates of poverty and maleducation than in Europe, perhaps encouraging more zealous faith (but see below). The fact that the more secular prosperous democracies enjoy lower rates of murder, incarceration, juvenile and adult mortality, STD infection, juvenile pregnancy, and abortion than in the United States may reduce their peoples' perceived need for the comfort of a benign deity. Contrary to the American conceit that the faith-based nation stands as a "shining city on a hill" to an increasingly skeptical world, the deep societal dysfunction of the sole prosperous Christian nation helps inspire growing skepticism in the rest of the West, aborting the very revival many Americans desire.

What Does the Future Hold? From the believer's perspective, then, the future of faith appears grim. S. Bruce observes that if the current trends continue, Christianity in England may soon be too small to be self-sustaining, in which case major denominations could go essentially extinct early in this century. With popular theism practically dead in Scandinavia and

Japan and showing no signs of revival in any other prosperous democracy, the United States is the last great Western hope of Christianity. But as D. G. Barrett et al. reluctantly acknowledge, the quickly rising number of the unchurched and those with no religion suggest that the United States is belatedly secularizing toward the Western norm. In fact, the level of nonreligiosity that Barrett et al. predicted for the year 2025 appears already to have been reached.

The options available to the defenders of faith are limited because most entail undesirable consequences. The current reactionary campaign to governmentalize faith by extending public funding to religious organizations in the United States risks assisting secularization in the way state churches arguably have done elsewhere. Although social conservatives have been successful in blaming liberalism for the materialistic, sex-focused, hedonistic mass culture that undermines faith-based lifestyles, the same conservative Christians lionize the corporate-driven social Darwinism that is by far the most powerful agent in defining culture away from traditional values. Evolutionary theory enjoys overwhelming scientific support, being a major contributor to the science and technology that remain central to the US economy and its place in the world. Evangelicals have little prospect of persuading more Americans to accept pseudoscientific creationism than already do so. Many liberal theists hold that faith can thrive in the face of widespread acceptance of evolutionary theory, but this view appears naive. J. Judis and R. Teixeira predict a US sociopolitical liberalization that should encourage further declines in religiosity; the rapid growth of the unchurched and the nonreligious suggests that this process too is already under way.

Can Christianity compensate for an American decline by recruiting elsewhere in the world? Major Christian inroads are unlikely in formerly Communist Europe, in China, India, and the Islamic world, or among nontheists. The only rich sources of converts to Christianity are pagans and animists in the third and second worlds, particularly in Africa. Catholicism is poised to become a predominantly third world faith; meanwhile, if other Christians hoped that the low-grade war between political Islam and the secular/Christian West would spark a religious revival, they have few successes to point to. As for Islam, though it will continue to gain in numbers through population growth, the chronically poor economic performance of most Islamic nations will probably render it largely impotent. There is no reason to expect Hinduism to make major gains outside the Indian subcontinent. Nor are New Age or other alternative beliefs likely to sweep the globe.

Conclusion. The nineteenth-century expectation that advancing science and rationality would vanquish organized religion has not been disconfirmed after all. Unbelievers, particularly in the United States, may feel exasperation that religion has not collapsed more quickly and thoroughly, but the message of the demographic data is

clear: it is believers in the supernatural, not skeptics, who have the most to fear in the twenty-first century.

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