Chapter 10

Conclusions: Secularization and its consequences

Since the September 2001 terrorist attacks, and their aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq, public interest in cultural and religious differences around the world has grown tremendously, and the debate about secularization theory and its recent critiques has seemed become increasingly relevant to contemporary concerns. The idea of secularization has a long and distinguished history in the social sciences with many seminal thinkers arguing that religiosity was declining throughout Western societies. Yet the precise reasons for this erosion of spirituality were not entirely clear. By the mid-1960s the popular claim that religion was in a state of terminal decline, rested upon flimsy evidence. Its proponents cited empirical evidence of declining churchgoing in Western Europe, and a handful of case studies that fit the thesis, rather than a systematic examination of empirical evidence from many countries.1

It was not surprising, therefore, that during the last decade American sociologists mounted a sustained counterattack on the basic premises of secularization theory.2 This critique threw many former proponents on the defensive; Peter Berger recanted former claims, noting that many exceptions had accumulated that appeared to challenge the basic prophesies of Weber and Durkheim—pointing to the continuing vitality of the Christian Right in the United States, the evangelical revival in Latin America, the new freedom of religion in post-Communist Europe, the reported resurgence of Islam in the Middle East, or evidence that religious practices and beliefs continued to thrive throughout most of Africa and Asia.3 Some of these reported phenomena may have been over-stated, but the simplistic assumption that religion was everywhere in decline, common in earlier decades, had become implausible to even the casual observer. Too many counter-examples existed around the world. The religious market argument sought to reconstruct our thinking about the primary drivers in religious faith, turning attention away from long-term sociological trends in the mass public’s demand for spiritual faith, and emphasizing instead institutional factors affecting the supply of religion, including the role of church leaders and organizations, and the role of the state in maintaining established religions or restrictions on freedom of worship for certain faiths.4

The attempt to reconstruct the early twentieth century sociology of religion was long overdue but the religious market theory was, we believe, fundamentally mistaken in trying to generalize from the distinctive American experience to the world as a whole. It is clear that the U.S. public remains far more religious than the publics of almost any other postindustrial society, with unusually high levels of belief in God, prayer, and church attendance, but we believe that this largely reflects other causes than those cited by religious market theory. Moreover the classic sociological thinkers never claimed that religion would erode universally; Weber’s core argument was that the rise of the rationality, following the Enlightenment, would undermine religious beliefs.
in the West. Durkheim claimed that the process of industrialization would lead to institutional differentiation, stripping the Christian church of key social functions. It is therefore knocking down a straw man, to criticize these theories by pointing out that religion remains strong in countries that have not yet experienced the industrialization process.

This concluding chapter recapitulates and clarifies our core secularization theory, summarizes the findings from the evidence examined in this book, and discusses some potential criticisms. We also demonstrate how conditions of existential security interact with religiosity and with patterns of population growth.

Societies where people's daily lives are shaped by the threat of poverty, disease and premature death, remain as religious today as centuries earlier. These same societies are also experiencing rapid population growth. In rich nations, by contrast, the evidence demonstrates that secularization has been proceeding since at least the mid-twentieth century (and probably earlier)-- but at the same time fertility rates have fallen sharply, so that in recent years population growth has stagnated and their total population is starting to shrink. The result of these combined trends is that rich societies are becoming more secular but the world as a whole is becoming more religious. Moreover, a growing gap has opened up between the value systems of rich and poor countries, making religious differences increasingly salient. There is no reason why this growing cultural divergence must inevitably lead to violent conflict, but it is a cleavage that fanatics and demagogues can seize, to use for their own ends.

Global differences over religion have been growing during the twentieth century, and this has important consequences for social change; for social capital, civic engagement and partisan politics; and for the potential risk of cultural conflict in world politics.

**The theory of existential security and secularization**

Since there is so much room for confusion in debates about secularization, let us restate our theory concisely, making explicit the core assumptions and hypotheses on which we base our main analysis and conclusions. Our theory is not based on Weberian claims about the rationality of belief systems, nor on Durkheimian arguments of functional differentiation. These processes probably have some impact, but we will set these contentious claims aside in this chapter to construct a clear set of logical propositions concerning another process that, we believe, plays an even more important role. The theory of existential security and secularization developed throughout this book is based upon two simple axioms, illustrated earlier in Figure 1.1, that prove to be extremely powerful in accounting for much of the variation in religious belief and practice that exists around the world.
The security axiom

The first premise, the security axiom, rests on the idea that societies around the world differ greatly in their levels of economic and human development and socioeconomic equality—and consequently, in the extent to which they provide their people with a sense of existential security. The more vulnerable populations, especially in poorer countries, chronically face life-threatening risks linked with malnutrition and lack of access to clean water; they are relatively defenseless against HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and against natural disasters; they lack effective public health care and education; and their life expectancies are low and their child mortality rates are high. Despite the spread of electoral democracy during the last decade, these problems tend to be compounded by lack of good governance, disregard for human rights, gender inequality and ethnic conflict, and political instability, and ultimately state failure.

The World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have highlighted these conditions and the U.N. Millennium Development Goals urged rich countries to do more to cope with these problems. The U.N. development program is designed to help poor countries by reducing debt, and by strengthening aid, investment, trade and technology transfers. The past thirty years saw dramatic improvements in some parts of the developing world: for example, the UNDP estimates that during this period average life expectancy increased by eight years and illiteracy was nearly cut in half. Some developing societies made tremendous strides, notably Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and parts of China and India have recently experienced impressive economic growth. There are also notable success stories in such countries as Botswana, Sri Lanka, and Mexico. Nevertheless the UNDP reports that worldwide progress has been erratic during the last decade, with some reversals: fully 54 countries (20 of them in Africa) are poorer now than in 1990; in 34 countries, life expectancy has fallen; in 21 nations the Human Development Index declined. In Africa, trends in HIV/AIDS and hunger are worsening. The gap between living conditions in rich and poor societies is growing.

The cultural traditions axiom

Our theory also builds upon the premise that the predominant religious beliefs, values and practices in any society are rooted in long-standing cultural traditions and histories. The religious traditions of Protestants and Catholics, Hindu and Muslim, shape the values, practices and beliefs of people living in these societies, even if they never set foot in a church, temple, or mosque, or if they personally adhere to a minority faith. These religious and cultural differences mean that we need to be cautious in generalizing across countries; attendance at services of worship, for example, and the role of prayer or meditation, are less important rituals in some faiths than in others. The symbolic meaning of similar religious acts differ worldwide: in Tokyo spiritual expression might mean stopping at a Shinto shrine to celebrate the New Year or welcoming visiting ancestral spirits in the midsummer feast of lights; in Algeria religious behavior might mean
visiting Mecca for the Great Pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime, as well as alms-giving, the
daily prayer ritual, and Friday worship in the Mosque; in Italy, pious observation might mean
attending Mass every day and observing confirmation and confession.

As the result of this diversity of beliefs and rituals, it is sometimes assumed that it is
impossible to compare religions, because each is sui generis. We agree that one needs to be
sensitive to variations in the core ideas, symbolic ceremonies, and specific rituals found among
the world’s faiths, denominations, and sects. But cross-national surveys can compare certain
core common elements shared by major world faiths, namely religious values and the self-
identified importance of religion for each person, whatever its particular form and beliefs. We can
also examine core religious practices (measured by attendance at services of worship and by
regular prayer or meditation), regardless of the specific ceremonies and rituals that are practiced.
We do not seek to compare the specific forms of theology, such as the meaning of faith for
Catholics, interpretations of the divine in Christian scriptures, the doctrine of Buddhism, Hinduism
or Baha’ism, the ceremonial rites of passage in Taoism, or the alternative forms of New Age
spirituality that are becoming popular in the West. We do analyze the extent to which people in
different societies and regions believe religion to be important in their lives, and how often they
engage in worship and prayer, as core common religious practices. Our analysis indicates that
these components of religion are cross-culturally comparable, and that they have a powerful
impact on people’s worldviews and behavior.

**Hypotheses**

A series of key propositions flow from these premises, tested throughout this book. None of
these hypotheses are particularly startling, but they are building blocks that, when put together,
cause us to rethink traditional accounts of the secularization process, and cast doubt on the most
influential recent alternative, the supply-side theory.

1. **The religious values hypothesis**

   Our first hypothesis holds that the conditions that people experience in their formative years
have a profound impact upon their cultural values. Growing up in societies in which survival is
uncertain, is conducive to a strong emphasis on religion; conversely, experiencing high levels of
existential security throughout one’s formative years, reduces the subjective importance of
religion in people’s lives. This hypothesis diverges sharply from the religious market assumption
that demand for religion is constant. On the contrary, our interpretation implies that the demand
for religion should be far stronger among low-income nations than among rich ones; and among
the less secure strata of society than among the affluent. We hypothesized that as a society
moves past the early stages of industrialization, and life becomes less nasty, less brutish and
longer, people tend to become more secular in their orientations.
Analysis of data from societies around the world revealed that the extent to which people emphasize religion and engage in religious behavior could, indeed, be predicted with considerable accuracy from a society’s level of economic development and other indicators of human development. Multivariate analysis demonstrated that a few basic developmental indicators such as per capita GNP, rates of AIDS/HIV, access to an improved water source, or the number of doctors per 100,000 people, predicted with remarkable precision how frequently the people of a given society worshiped or prayed. These factors explain most of the variance even without taking into account the specific belief-systems of given countries, or the institutional structures of religion, such as the organizational characteristics and financial resources of evangelical churches in Latin America, the philanthropic efforts of Catholic missionaries, the legal-institutional state regulation of freedom of worship in post-Communist Europe, or the role of the clergy in Africa. The most crucial explanatory variables are those that differentiate between vulnerable societies, and societies in which survival is so secure that people take it for granted during their formative years.

2. The religious cultures hypothesis

Our theory hypothesizes that, although rising levels of existential security are conducive to secularization, cultural change is path-dependent: the historically predominant religious tradition of a given society tends to leave a lasting impact on religious beliefs and other social norms, ranging from approval of divorce, to gender roles, tolerance of homosexuality, and work orientations. Where a society started from, continues to influence where it is at later points in time, so that the citizens of historically Protestant societies continue to show values that are distinct from those prevailing in historically Catholic or Hindu or Orthodox or Confucian societies. These cross-national differences do not reflect the influence of the religious authorities today—they persist even in societies where the vast majority no longer attends church. They reflect historical influences that shaped given national cultures, and today affect the entire population; thus, within The Netherlands, Catholics, Protestants and those who have left the church, all tend to share a common national value system that is very distinctive in global perspective.

A society’s historical heritage leaves a lasting imprint, but the process of secularization tends to bring systematic cultural changes the move in a predictable direction, diminishing the importance of religion in people’s lives and weakening allegiance to traditional cultural norms, making people more tolerant of divorce, abortion, homosexuality and cultural change in general. It may seem paradoxical to claim that economic development brings systematic changes and that a society’s cultural heritage continues to influence it, but it is not: if every society in the world were moving in the same direction, at the same rate of speed, they would remain as far apart as ever, and would never converge.
The reality is not that simple, of course: secularization started earliest and has moved farthest in the most economically developed countries; and little or no secularization has taken place in the low-income countries. But this means that the cultural differences linked with economic development not only are not shrinking, they are growing larger. Secularization and the persistence of cultural differences are perfectly compatible.

Weber claimed that Protestantism reshaped attitudes toward work, which had a decisive impact on economic growth and development, fuelling the spirit of capitalism. But the very fact that the historically Protestant countries were the first to industrialize and attain high levels of mass existential security means that they should tend to have relatively secularized cultures today. Similarly, survey evidence reveals that those living in contemporary Protestant societies have the weakest, not the strongest, adherence to the work ethic today, in comparison with all the other major religious cultures. Those living in Protestant nations today give roughly equal weight to the values of work and leisure, whereas the publics of most other societies give overwhelming priority to work. A society’s religious heritage has a lasting imprint on moral issues, such as attitudes towards abortion and suicide. But as we have observed, long-term processes of development are transforming basic cultural values, moving publics towards moral liberalism on issues of sexuality and towards pursuit of opportunities for self-fulfillment outside of the workplace and economic sphere.

Another influential thesis that we examined was Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, which claims that one of the most important cultural divisions between the Western and Muslim worlds concerns differences over democratic political values. In the post-Cold War era, Huntington argues that this ‘culture clash’ is a major potential source of international and domestic conflict. The comparative evidence in chapter 6 points to four main findings. First, when we compared political attitudes (including evaluations of how well democracy works in practice, support for democratic ideals, and disapproval of authoritarian leadership), far from a ‘clash of values’, we found only modest difference between the Islamic world and the West. Instead, the largest cleavage over democratic values was between ex-Soviet states in Eastern European (such as Russia, Ukraine and Moldova), which display minimal support for democracy, and most other countries that display far more positive attitudes, including both Western and Islamic nations. This pattern could as plausibly be explained as reflecting the residual legacy of the Cold War and a realistic evaluation of the actual performance of democracy in these states, as by the reemergence of ethnic conflict based on the values of the Orthodox Church. We did find that support for a strong role by religious authorities is stronger in Muslim societies than in the West, but again it is not a simple dichotomy; many other types of society also support an active role for religious leaders in public life, including the Sub Saharan African countries and Latin American countries.
It is clear that religious cultures have an important impact, (which was underestimated by Huntington), in predicting beliefs about gender equality and sexual liberalization. In this regard, the West is far more egalitarian and liberal than all other societies, particularly Muslim nations. Generational comparisons suggest that this gap has steadily widened as the younger birth cohorts in the West have gradually become more liberal in their sexual mores while the younger cohorts in Islamic societies remain deeply traditional. The results suggest that modern Western societies are indeed different, especially concerning the transformation of orientations associated with the sexual revolution that occurred in recent decades, fundamental changes in the nature of modern families, and more expressive lifestyles. Equality for women has progressed much further, and transformed traditional cultural beliefs and values about the appropriate division of sex roles far more deeply, in affluent Western societies than in the rest of the world, but these changes are beginning to reshape prosperous East Asian societies as well. Support for gender equality and tolerance of divorce, homosexuality and so forth, are not part of the Western Christian tradition—they are recent developments even there—and are not uniquely Western. They are cultural changes linked with high levels of economic development and the emergence of the knowledge society.

3. The religious participation hypothesis

We expected that religious values and beliefs would heavily influence religious practices, such as attendance at services of worship, the frequency of prayer or meditation. The evidence strongly supports this expectation; Figure 10.1 compares the mean frequency of attendance in religious services against the strength of religious values in each society (using a four-point scale to monitor the importance of religion). The graph shows a remarkably strong correlation ($R^2 = .73$); religious values seem to have a strong impact on religious participation in most countries. Countries located in the bottom left-hand corner, such as the Czech Republic, Denmark and France, consistently displayed relatively secular orientations on both indicators. By contrast, other societies located in the top right quadrant, such as South Africa, the United States, and El Salvador, are consistently highly religious by both measures. Yet a number of outliers were also evident, where religious participation was higher than expected, falling above the regression line near the top right corner, notably Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe, as well as Ireland, Poland, and India. In these societies, other factors seem to be important in encouraging religious engagement, such as social norms, communal networks, and informal group pressures to attend services for those living in highly religious communities. In the bottom right quadrant, located below the regression line, Muslims living in Iran, Turkey and Egypt regarded religion as very important to their lives, and yet fewer than expected actually participated regularly in worship services.

[Figure 10.1 about here]
We followed a similar procedure to examine the relationship between core religious beliefs and patterns of religious participation. Some writers suggest that an important distinction can be drawn between ‘belonging’ and ‘believing.’ Thus, Grace Davie argues that in Britain the shrinking number of people attending church services has not been accompanied by a widespread decline in religious beliefs. In Western Europe as a whole, Davie argues that similar patterns can be observed: “Western Europeans are unchurched populations, rather than simply secular. For a marked falling-off in religious attendance (especially in the Protestant North) has not resulted, yet, in the abdication of religious belief.” Opinion polls also suggest the persistence of widespread adherence to many of the core ideas and beliefs in Christianity in the United States. As Wilcox and Jelen summarized the evidence, linking beliefs and participation: “The United States has a remarkably high level of religious belief and observance, a fact that makes the country an outlier in the well-established relationship between socioeconomic development and religious observance. Citizens in the United States are more likely to believe in a personal God, in an afterlife, in heaven, and especially in Satan and hell than are citizens in Europe. They are more likely to attend church weekly or more often and to pray regularly.” Andrew Greeley has suggested that many Central and Eastern European societies have also experienced a recent resurgence of spiritual beliefs, with the demise of the Soviet Union opening the door to freedom of worship in post-Communist states. Systematic cross-national evidence comparing religious beliefs in much of the rest of the world is scarce, although observers have cited various signs of faith-based revivals and counter-secular movements including the strength of Orthodox Judaism in Israeli politics, the spread of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America, and the strength of conservative Islamic movements in some Middle Eastern and North African nations.

The strength of common religious beliefs can be compared using a simple 4-point scale, summarizing faith in the existence of heaven, hell, life after death, and whether people have a soul. These items have varying shades of meaning and emphasis in diverse faiths, creeds, and sects, but they go together to form a Religious Belief scale that has a high degree of statistical reliability and internal consistency across each of the major types of religion, suggesting that they tap a common dimension of core beliefs. As figure 10.2 illustrates, the strength of religious beliefs also predicts a country’s level of religious participation with a fair degree of accuracy, although there was a broader scattering of societies around the regression line than was found with the measure of religious values. Nigeria, Uganda, Ireland, India, and the Philippines all showed higher levels of participation than would be expected from the strength of religious beliefs alone, while Egypt, Turkey and Iran again proved lower than expected, suggesting that contingent factors in these countries help shape religious practice.
The distinctively high levels of churchgoing in the United States can be accounted for by the strength of religious values and beliefs in America, with this country falling where expected on the regression line—which still leaves open the question why all these indicators of religiosity are stronger in America than in most other rich postindustrial societies. One possibility is the fact that the U.S. was founded by religious refugees, who attached so much importance to religion that they were willing to risk their lives in a dangerous new environment in order to be able to practice their religion—and were able to transmit this outlook, to some extent, to succeeding waves of immigrants. We do not have data that enable us to test this hypothesis, but in chapter 4 we examined another possibility, finding evidence that existential security interacts with conditions of socioeconomic equality. The United States has a less comprehensive social welfare safety net than most other countries with comparable levels of economic development, so that many still experience existential insecurity—a situation also found in many oil-rich states. One manifestation of this is the fact that life expectancy is slightly lower in America than in most other rich nations. The particular pattern of immigration and multiculturalism that characterizes the United States may also contribute towards this phenomenon; America contains many first- and second-generation migrants drawn originally from poorer nations in Central and South America, as well as from poorer countries in Asia, bringing relatively strong religiosity with them.

4. The civic engagement hypothesis

We also predicted (our fifth hypothesis) that greater engagement in religious practices would encourage political and social activism, and hence social capital and civic engagement, whether expressed through belonging to faith-based organizations, membership in civic society groups, or support for political parties. Social capital theory has attracted extensive interest in recent years, as many social scientists have sought to explore the role of voluntary associations and civic organizations. The claim of this theory is that social capital fosters the production of private goods (benefiting the individual) and also public goods (benefiting society). Social capital is regarded as generating capacity building for communities, just as the investment of economic capital is productive for manufacturing goods and services. Studies have emphasized that in the United States, mainline Protestant churches play a vital role in ‘bridging’ diverse groups within local communities, encouraging the face-to-face contact, social linkages, and organizational networks that, in turn, are thought to generate interpersonal trust and collaboration in local communities on issues of common concern.

The evidence examined in chapter 8 supports the claim that in many countries, not just the United States, religious participation (as measured by the frequency of attending worship services) is positively associated with belonging to related religious organizations, such as faith-based charities, youth groups, and social clubs, as well as to some non-religious voluntary organizations and community associations. Moreover membership in religious organizations (but
not attendance at religious services) was significantly linked with selected indicators of civic engagement, including social attitudes and political participation.

But it remains difficult to sort out the direction of causality in these associations. Belonging to churches may bring people into contact with a wider range of friends, neighbors and colleagues, beyond their immediate family, thereby encouraging people to join other social networks and community associations. But it could also be true that the people who are most likely to join voluntary groups in their community, are also most likely to join churches, or other religious organizations. It seems likely that a process of mutually reinforcing reciprocal causation underlies these relationships, so that sociable ‘joiners’ not only attend churches, but also various other civic organizations. In any case, the effect of declining churchgoing on civic engagement seems to have been largely offset by the emergence of new social movements, protest politics, and newer forms of virtual communications that encourage alternative forms of political mobilization and expression.

In earlier eras, one’s religious identity provided a cue that oriented voters towards political parties, and helped define one’s ideological position on the political spectrum. In this regard, differences between Protestants and Catholics in Western Europe functioned as a cognitive shortcut, similar to the role of social class, which linked voters to parties; these linkages often persisted throughout an individual’s lifetime. In recent decades, however, as secularization has progressively weakened religious identities in advanced industrial societies, we would expect to find that the political impact of denominational differences would play a declining role in party and electoral politics. In consequence, parties that once had strong organizational links to the Catholic Church, such as the Christian Democrats in West Germany, Italy, and Austria, have become more secular in their electoral appeals, moving towards ‘bridging strategies’ that enable them to win electoral support from many diverse social groups.

The evidence examined in chapter 9 serves to confirm these expectations; in postindustrial nations, religious values continue to predict a sense of affiliation with the political right. This religious gap remains significant even after employing our standard battery of societal and individual controls. This gap is found in many diverse societies, suggesting a fairly universal pattern at work in people’s ideological orientations. Nevertheless, we have also found that the relationship between religiosity and Right political orientations seems to have weakened during the last twenty years in most industrial and postindustrial societies, apart from the United States and Austria. In an important sense, the bottom-line test lies in the votes actually cast in national elections—and we find that during the past fifty years, support for religious parties has fallen in most postindustrial nations, especially in Catholic Europe.

This finding reflects the pattern that was found with churchgoing in Europe: in both cases religion starts from a far higher base, and then falls more sharply, in Catholic countries than in
Protestant ones. Secularization appears to be a process that started in Protestant Europe well before survey evidence began to become available, so that at the start of the postwar era, these countries already had considerably lower levels of support for religious parties than those found in Catholic countries. Consequently, during the past half-century the process of secularization has affected Catholic Europe most strongly, and these countries are now approaching, but not yet attaining, the low levels of religiosity found in Northern Europe. Precisely as we found with religious practices, values and beliefs, the United States remains an outlier in its emphasis on the importance of politics in religion. Secularization has generally been sweeping through affluent nations, in politics as well as in society, although the pace of change and its effects differ from one country to another. We do not have any substantial body of time-series data with which to analyze trends in pre-industrial countries, as we do with the advanced industrial societies of Europe and North America, but the limited evidence that is available indicates that there is no worldwide decline of religiosity, or of the role of religion in politics: this is a phenomenon of industrial and postindustrial society.

5. The religious markets hypothesis

Using multiple methods, we have analyzed evidence from almost 80 societies, carrying out cross-cultural comparisons at both the societal and individual levels and examining time-series survey data, and generational comparisons to test a series of hypothesis concerning the relationship between secularization and existential security. We also tested empirically the core propositions of the most influential contemporary alternative interpretation; the supply-side based religious market theory.

Religious market theory holds that religious participation is mainly influenced by the institutional ‘supply’ of religion and the role of the state. It predicts that religious participation will increase with (1) greater religious pluralism and (2) less state regulation of religious institutions. These institutional explanations appear plausible in the light of several historical examples of the relationship between the church and state.

The leading example cited as evidence that religious pluralism produces high levels of religious belief and participation is the U.S. But although religious pluralism does indeed go together with relatively high levels of religiosity in the U.S., such countries as Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Bangladesh, Egypt, Nigeria, Uganda, Brazil and Colombia all show much higher levels of both religious belief and religious practice – in societies where as much as 99 percent of the population belong to one politically and socially dominant religion. A few of these countries, such as Nigeria, show high degrees of religious pluralism, but most of them are extremely homogeneous: what they have in common is poverty. The American public is strongly religious only in comparison with the publics of other advanced industrial societies: it ranks far below most poor societies. Multivariate analysis of data from a wide range of societies
does not support the hypothesis that religious pluralism produces high levels of religiosity. We suggested other reasons why the U.S. is a deviant case among rich countries.

Does less state regulation of religion produce high levels of religiosity? Again, a number of examples (including the U.S.) seem to support this hypothesis. Yet state persecution of religion can be counter-productive. Efforts to stamp out religion in Poland, for example, had the effect of turning the Roman Catholic Church into a bastion of Polish independence against Russian oppression both under the Czars and under the Soviet Union. And in Russia, where for seventy years official Soviet policy enforced state atheism, support for the Russian Orthodox Church persists to the present. To test Religious Markets theory, we used the Herfindahl index of religious pluralism, and the Chaves and Cann index of state regulation. We also developed a more comprehensive new 20-point Index of Religious Freedom focusing upon the relationship of the state and church, monitoring such issues as whether the constitution constrains freedom of religion, whether the government restricts certain denominations or sects, and whether there is an established church. Using these separate and independent measures, no systematic empirical support was found for the propositions that religious pluralism or state regulation mattered; indeed, on the contrary, we found precisely the reverse. In the world as a whole, the most homogeneous religious cultures, and the societies with the greatest state regulation of religion, have the greatest religious participation and the strongest faith in God.

This is not accidental. In many poor societies, where religion is central to society, authoritarian rulers have a direct interest in promoting or controlling religious institutions in order to maintain their power and legitimacy. In such societies, religious and political power are closely linked. The process of modernization usually brings a decline in the salience of religion, for reasons already described, as well as encouraging the spread of human rights and political liberties, and the state no longer exerts so much control over religious authorities. Even where there are established churches, their societal significance gradually fades away: nominally, such countries as England and Sweden have established church; their real power has become very modest. Human development tends to generate both greater tolerance for religious freedom and the erosion of religious values. There is no doubt that institutions can play a role maintaining religious vitality, but if the mass public is deserting the churches in advanced industrialized societies, supply side efforts have modest effect: there is little that religious leaders can do to revive public demand.

6. The demographic hypothesis

Given the findings considered so far, one might assume that the process of secularization would gradually sweep through the world, as development gradually improved living conditions in poorer countries. This was the conventional wisdom a few decades ago. But the reality is more complex—and culminates in exactly the opposite result.
We hypothesized that one of the major factors driving religiosity, is the need for a sense of certainty in a world where existence is full of danger and uncertainty. This is not the only motivating factor. Philosophers and theologians have sought to probe into the meaning and purpose of life since the dawn of history; but for the great majority of the population, who lived at the margin of subsistence, the need for reassurance and a sense of certainty was the main function of religion. In societies where existential insecurity has faded into the background, this factor has become less compelling.

But secularization and human development has a paradoxical secondary consequence. It is linked with a precipitate decline of fertility rates, driving demographic changes that prevent secularization from sweeping the world. Although poorer countries such as Pakistan, El Salvador, Uganda and Nigeria have high infant mortality rates, their publics place much more emphasis on religious values than do the publics of rich countries—which is conducive to their also having much higher fertility rates than those found in richer countries, for the reasons discussed in Chapter 1. The net result is that poor nations also have incomparably greater population growth than rich, secularized countries, where the population is stagnant and starting to shrink. Thus, despite the fact that a large part of the world has begun to industrialize during the past century, and secularization occurs in virtually every industrialized country, there are more people with traditional values today than ever before in history.

The basic demographic indicators demonstrating these propositions are shown in Table 10.1, including macro-level rates of fertility, longevity, infant mortality and survival, derived from the World Bank World Development Indicators. For comparison, 73 societies in the pooled World Values Survey, 1981-2001 are classified into three categories: the most secular, the moderate and the most religious, based on their overall mean levels of religious values (using the 10-point ‘importance of God’ scale).

A country’s fertility rate reflects the average number of children born to women of childbearing years (16-44); these rates are shown for the period 1970-1975 and again for 2000-2005. The results show how women are having far fewer children during the last thirty years across all types of society: on average, the fertility rate dropped from 3.8 to 2.1. But there remain sharp contrasts between the most secular and religious societies; today women of childbearing age living in secular societies have an average of 1.8 children, while in societies where traditional religious beliefs prevail, women have an average of 2.8 children. The indicators for life expectancy, infant mortality, and rates of survival to old age all highlight the extent to which secular and religious societies differ in their life-chances; in secular nations, people live longer, fewer children die, and more people survive to old age. As argued in the introduction, culture can be viewed as a survival strategy for a given society, and we find two contrasting survival
strategies. In subsistence-level traditional societies life is insecure and relatively short; their cultural systems vary in many respects, but in virtually every case they encourage people to produce large numbers of children, and discourage anything that threatens the family, such as divorce, homosexuality or abortion. Rich, secular societies produce fewer people, but with relatively high investment in each individual, producing knowledge societies with high levels of education, long life expectancies, and advanced economic and technological levels. Virtually all affluent postindustrial countries have life expectancies of more than 70 years, and women in these societies have fertility rates of between one and two children—tending to hover near the population replacement level or even falling below it. The United States is an exception to the prevailing pattern among rich nations here, as in many other ways, with slightly higher fertility and lower life expectancy. At the other extreme, people have a life expectancy of forty years or less in the poorest agrarian nations in the world, such as Niger, Burkina Faso and Guinea-Bissau, and the total fertility rate for women in these societies is between 7 to 8 children.

The net effect of these survival strategies upon annual rates of population growth is illustrated in Table 10.2. From 1975-1997, the population in the two-dozen most religious societies under comparison grew at a rate of 2.2 percent per annum, compared with 0.7 percent in secular, rich nations. For the second period, from 1997-2015, it is estimated that population growth in religious societies will have slowed to 1.5 percent, which still brings substantial growth. By contrast, in the more secular states, average population growth has plummeted to 0.2 percent, and in some countries has already become negative. In affluent societies, women today have greater control over reproduction through widespread availability of contraception and abortion; they also have wider opportunities in education, the paid workforce, and the broader public sphere, and more egalitarian perceptions of sex roles. The typical family structure has also been transformed during the last half century in postindustrial societies, for both men and women, by the rising age at which people first get married, patterns of cohabitation, growing numbers of single-parent households, rising rates of divorce, and the aging population. Figure 10.3 illustrates the fact that societies where religion is considered most important are also the ones that have shown the highest population growth rates during the last thirty years, while secular societies have low rates of population growth.

What does this process mean for the world’s population? The estimates in Table 10.3 give a broad indication of how this translates into demographic trends during the twentieth century, and also during the last three decades, according to our classification of these types of society. In the 73 societies under comparison, just over two billion live in relatively secular societies, and these countries have seen a 41% increase in the total size of their populations during the last
thirty years. Almost as many people (1.7 billion) today live in relatively religious countries, but they have seen a 82% rise in their population during the same period, with greater female fertility producing twice as much growth, despite high infant mortality and low life expectancies. Another way to understand the effects of this process is to compare the proportion of the publics under comparison living in secular and religious societies; in 1970, 45% lived in secular societies and 29% lived in religious societies. By 2002, the figures had become 40% and 33% respectively.

Thus, as was pointed out in Chapter 1, we find two apparently contradictory trends:

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.

These two propositions are not contradictory— because secularization has a powerful negative impact on human fertility rates. The rich countries, in which secularization is most advanced, now have human fertility rates far below the replacement level—while poor societies with traditional religious worldviews have fertility rates that are far above the replacement level, and contain a growing share of the world’s population.

Both culture and human development influence this process. In previous research, we developed a powerful multi-item indicator of Traditional vs. Secular-rational values that taps a major dimension of cross-cultural variation. This dimension reflects how strongly given societies emphasize religion and a number of other related orientations. Traditionally oriented societies emphasize the importance of parent-child ties and family values; they strongly reject divorce, abortion, prostitution and homosexuality. Societies with secular-rational values have the opposite preferences on all of these topics. To a large extent, traditional values focus on protecting the family, encouraging reproduction within marriage, and discouraging any other kind of sexual behavior. The move from traditional values to secular-rational values brings a cultural shift from an emphasis on a role for women, whose lives are largely limited to producing and raising as many children as possible, to a world where women have an increasingly broad range of life choices, and most have careers and interests outside the home. This development is linked with a dramatic decline in fertility rates, as illustrated in Figure 10.5. Thus, although it was not designed to do so, our multi-item indicator of Traditional/Secular-rational values is a remarkably powerful indicator of fertility rates, as Model 1 in Table 10.4 demonstrates. The single item measuring religious values (the importance of religion), used throughout this book, also proved highly significant as an alternative item predicting fertility rates, as show in Table 10.4 Model 2.
Yet cultural values are not the whole story, because patterns of human development also contribute towards human fertility rates, as Table 10.4 also demonstrates. The improvements in health care that accompanies human development usually give women easier access to family planning, though the availability of contraception and abortion, while women’s growing literacy, education and paid employment in the labor force expands their awareness of family planning and opportunities outside of the private sphere. The improvements in infant mortality that come from better nutrition, immunization, and access to clean water mean that there are fewer risks from planning smaller families. The younger age profile of developing societies also means that these contain more women of childbearing age. Moreover in peasant societies, children and adolescents play a vital role in sustaining small agricultural holdings, also providing parents with protection against disability in old age, whereas the economic role of the family shrinks in industrialized economies and the welfare state provides an alternative source of care for the elderly. For all these reasons, the combined impact of culture plus development explains, in total, two-thirds of the variations in fertility rates in the societies under comparison.

**Implications and Challenges**

Further research could deepen our understanding of these phenomena. Future surveys could look more directly at perceptions of risk and security, to provide direct attitudinal evidence linking the living conditions of rich and poor societies to individual levels of religiosity, and from there to fertility rates. This seems to be the most plausible interpretation of the evidence examined throughout this book, but it is possible that some other factor present in developing nations, not addressed by our theoretical framework or analyzed in our models, might provide an alternative explanation of the strong linkages we have found between economic development and fertility rates. In this regard, we need to develop new measures tapping perceptions of the ego-tropic and socio-tropic risks most common in different contexts and cultures. It will also be useful to go further in analyzing survey data monitoring the long-term evolution of religious beliefs, values and practices in case studies of particular nations beyond the postindustrial societies usually studied in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and North America. We now have a half-century of survey data from a number of developed countries, along with complementary data drawn from church records and census records; but we have very little time series data from low-income societies, and thus no direct measure of whether secularization or a resurgence of religiosity is occurring in them.

Moreover, the national outliers and anomalies to the general cultural patterns we have established are worth examining in detail. It is clear that the United States is exceptionally religious for its level of development, but it remains unclear why. Conversely, some relatively poor societies have relatively secular cultures: the Confucian-influenced societies, in particular, emphasize Secular-rational values significantly more than their economic level would predict—
and this may be a contributing factor in helping explain why China has attained much lower fertility rates than other relatively poor societies. Strong, coercive governmental policies are the proximate cause of China’s low fertility rates, but other governments have attempted to reduce birth rates without attaining comparable success.

A closer examination of differential patterns of development among Christian denominations within given countries and regions, such as the rise of evangelicalism and the erosion of Catholicism reported in Latin America, and complex patterns of religiosity found in Africa, would also provide important insights that go far beyond the materials considered in this book. We have also only started to compare systematic and representative cross-national survey data in a diverse range of Islamic societies, but the limited evidence we have examined suggests that this approach is likely to challenge some of the conventional wisdom about public opinion in these societies.

This book has demonstrated that, with rising levels of existential security, the publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during at least the past fifty years. Earlier perceptions of this process gave rise to the mistaken assumption that religion was disappearing. “God is dead,” proclaimed Nietzsche more than a century ago. A massive body of empirical evidence points to a very different conclusion. As a result of contrasting demographic trends in rich and poor countries, 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.

The expanding gap between the sacred and the secular societies around the globe will have important consequences for world politics, making the role of religion increasingly salient on the global agenda. It is by no means inevitable that the religious gap will lead to greater ethno-religious conflict and violence. Indeed the best available evidence of long-term trends in ethno-religious conflict, the latest Minorities at Risk report, goes against this scenario, demonstrating falling levels of such conflict during the 1990s. The main factors driving this development can be found in the dramatic spread of democratization that occurred worldwide since the late 1980s, which facilitated greater autonomy or self-determination for many ethno-religious minorities, and the end of some of the most repressive state regimes.

Nevertheless the persistence of traditional religious beliefs in poorer agrarian societies may be stimulated by the contrast between their situation and the growing secularization pervasive elsewhere. The spread of sexual liberalization, emancipated women, and secular policies, can generate powerful reactions among those who cherish traditional values. We have already seen symptoms such as the resurgence of fundamentalist movements, and support for leaders and parties who mobilize popular support based on appeals to religious values, among people with traditional beliefs. Even within moderately rich societies, fundamentalist Evangelical
churches and sects have become visible politically\textsuperscript{20}. This does not mean that the publics of these societies are becoming more religious and more traditional. The empirical evidence indicates that precisely the opposite is happening in advanced industrial societies. Evangelists with relatively traditional values are expanding at the expense of the more modernized mainline religious groups partly because of the differential fertility rates that are linked with traditional vs. modern worldviews in the world as a whole. Waves of migrants entering the United States from developing countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia, bringing conservative cultural values with them, have reinvigorated religious life. Moreover, fundamentalist groups in advanced industrial societies have been galvanized into unprecedented levels of organized action because they perceive that many of their most basic values (concerning abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and family values) are being threatened by rapid cultural changes in their societies. In the post-Cold War world, the widening gap between the core values held by the more religious and more secular societies will probably increase the salience and importance of cultural issues in international affairs. How well we manage to accommodate and tolerate these cultural differences, or how far we fail, remains one of the core challenges for the twenty-first century.
### Table 10.1: Demographic indicators by type of society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of society</th>
<th>Fertility (Rate)</th>
<th>Life expectancy (years)</th>
<th>Infant mortality (Rate)</th>
<th>Survival to old age (%)</th>
<th>Nations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most secular</td>
<td>2.8 1.8</td>
<td>68.7 74.4</td>
<td>35.4 12.4</td>
<td>85.3 72.3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>3.3 1.7</td>
<td>68.3 74.7</td>
<td>43.5 15.7</td>
<td>85.9 75.0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most religious</td>
<td>5.4 2.8</td>
<td>57.7 68.2</td>
<td>94.5 39.1</td>
<td>74.6 65.1</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.8 2.1</td>
<td>65.0 72.5</td>
<td>56.8 22.4</td>
<td>82.0 70.8</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

**Type of society:** Based on macro-level mean religious values measured on the 10-point to ‘importance of God’ scale.

**Fertility:** Total fertility rate per woman

**Life expectancy:** Life expectancy at birth (in years)

**Infant mortality:** Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)

**Survival:** Probability at birth of surviving to age 65 (% cohort)

**Nations:** Number of societies

**Source:** World Bank 2003 *World Development Indicators. Washington DC: World Bank:*

Table 10.2: Population growth rate by type of society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of society</th>
<th>Nations</th>
<th>Annual population growth rate (%)</th>
<th>Annual population growth rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most secular</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most religious</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Type of society:** Based on mean macro-level religious values measured on the 10-point to 'importance of God' scale, WVS 1981-2001.

**Nations:** Number of societies

**Source:** World Bank 2003 *World Development Indicators. Washington DC: World Bank:*

### Table 10.3: Estimated population growth by type of society, 1900-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of society</th>
<th>Total estimated population (In millions)</th>
<th>Population growth (In millions)</th>
<th>Population growth (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most secular</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>1,468</td>
<td>2,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>1,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most religious</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,486</td>
<td>3,242</td>
<td>5,122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Type of society:** Based on mean macro-level religious values measured on the 10-point to ‘importance of God’ scale, pooled WVS 1981-2001. It should be noted that we are therefore comparing contemporary macro-levels of religiosity, not those existing in 1900.

Table 10.4: Explaining fertility rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human development and traditional/secular-rational values</td>
<td>Human development and religious values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of human development</td>
<td>-4.23</td>
<td>.707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(100-point scale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious values (4-point scale)</td>
<td>.521</td>
<td>.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional/secular-rational value scale</td>
<td>-.695</td>
<td>.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.688</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table presents the results of ordinary least squares regression models where the fertility rate is the dependent variable in 73 societies. The figures represent unstandardized beta (B), the standard error (s.e.), standardized beta (Beta), and their significance of the coefficients. The models were checked with tolerance statistics for multicollinearity.

Level of human development: Human Development Index 2001 (UNDP)


Traditional/secular-rational values: Measured by support of the following items: ‘God is very important in respondent’s life; It is more important for a child to learn obedience and religious faith than independence and determination; Autonomy index; Abortion is never justifiable; Respondent has strong sense of national pride; Respondent favors respect for authority.’ In contrast support for Secular-rational values is measured by the opposite position on all of above. The scale uses the factor analysis scores.

Religious values: Q10 “How important is religion in your life? Very important, rather important, not very important, not at all important?” WVS.

Figure 10.1: Religious behavior and religious values

Note: Religious participation: Q185 “Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days? More than once a week, once a week, once a month, only on special hold days, once a year, less often, never or practically never.”

Sources: World Values Survey pooled 1981-2001
Figure 10.2: Religious participation and beliefs

Note: Religious participation: Q185 “Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days? More than once a week, once a week, once a month, only on special hold days, once a year, less often, never or practically never.” The proportion that attended ‘Once a week or more.’

Sources: World Values Survey, pooled 1981-2001
Figure 10.3: Religious values and population growth rates, 1975-1998

Notes:

**Importance of religion:** Q10 “How important is religion in your life? Very important, rather important, not very important, not at all important?”


**Source:** World Values Survey, pooled 1981-2001.
Figure 10.4: Fertility rates and traditional/secular-rational values, mid-1990s


Replacement level

R = .77


12 The 4-item scale of religious beliefs was tested for reliability. The Cronbach’s Alpha for the scale was as follows: Catholics (.789), Protestants (.804), Orthodox (.813), Jewish (.749), Muslim (.910), Hindu (.795), and Buddhist (.863). It should be noted that a further item monitoring belief in God was carried in the WVS but this was not included in the scale because exploratory factor analysis suggested that this item loaded on the values scale (along with the importance of religion) rather than the belief scale.


17 The Traditional values scale is measured by support of the following items: God is very important in respondent’s life; It is more important for a child to learn obedience and religious faith than independence and determination; Autonomy index; Abortion is never justifiable; Respondent has strong sense of national pride; Respondent favors respect for authority. By contrast support for Secular-rational values is measured by the opposite position on all of above. See Ronald Inglehart. 1997. Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker. 2000. ‘Modernization, globalization and the persistence of tradition: Empirical evidence from 65 societies.’ American Sociological Review. 65: 19-55.


http://members.aol.com/CSPmgm/cspframe.htm