

God, guns and gays¹

Supply and demand of religion in the US and western Europe



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Since the September 2001 terrorist attacks, and subsequent conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, public interest in cultural and religious differences around the world has grown tremendously. Debates about secularisation theory and its recent critiques have become increasingly relevant to contemporary concerns. The idea of secularisation has a long and distinguished history in the social sciences with many seminal thinkers arguing that religiosity was declining throughout western societies.

The seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile 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 (see Bruce [ed] 1992 and Aldridge 2000). They were far from alone: 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 secularisation was ranked with bureaucratisation, rationalisation, and urbanisation as the key historical revolutions transforming medieval agrarian societies into modern industrial nations (Wright Mills, 1959).

During the last decade this thesis of the slow and steady death of religion has come under growing criticism. Indeed secularisation theory is currently experiencing the most sustained challenge in its long history. Critics, including those who advocated secularism in the 1960s, point to indicators of religious health and vitality today (see Berger 1967 and 1999; Stark 1999; Stark and Finke 2000). This ranged from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the US 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.

Were Comte, Durkheim, Weber and Marx completely misled in their beliefs about religious decline in industrialised societies? Was the predominant sociological view during the twentieth century totally misguided? Has the debate been settled? We think not. Talk of burying the secularisation theory is premature. The critique relies too heavily on selected anomalies and focuses too heavily on the US (which happens to be a striking deviant case) rather than comparing systematic evidence across a broad range of rich and poor societies (Finke 1992). We need to move beyond studies

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of Catholic and Protestant church attendance in Europe (where attendance is falling) and the US (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 secularisation 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 secularisation captures an important part of what is going on. Our work aimed to develop a revised version of secularisation theory that emphasises 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 secularisation has occurred most clearly among the most prosperous social sectors living in affluent and secure post-industrial nations.

Secularisation 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 examples, 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 and in surveys most Europeans still express formal belief in God, or identify themselves as Protestants or Catholics on official forms. 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 secularisation in rich nations concerns values and behaviour: the critical test is what people say is important to their lives and what they actually do. During the twentieth century in nearly all post-industrial nations 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 50 years confirm this phenomenon. The US remains exceptional in this regard. The strongest challenge to secularisation theory arises from American observers who commonly point out that claims of steadily diminishing congregations in western Europe are sharply at odds with US trends, at least until the early 1990s (Berger 1999 and Greeley 2003). This brief paper, drawn from a larger research project, focuses upon evidence establishing the variations in religiosity among post-industrial nations, in particular contrasts between America and western Europe (Norris and Inglehart 2004).

Comparing religiosity in post-industrial nations

We can start by considering the cross-national evidence for how the indicators of religiosity apply to post-industrial nations. Figure 1 shows the basic pattern of religious behaviour, highlighting the substantial contrasts between the cluster of countries which prove by far the most religious in this comparison, including

Table 1: Belief in God, 1947-2001

Nation	1947	1968	1975	1981	1990	1995	2001	Change	b.	Sig. (P)
Sweden	80	60		52	38	48	46	-33.6	-.675	**
Netherlands	80	79		64	61		58	-22.0	-.463	*
Australia	95		80	79		75	75	-19.9	-.379	**
Norway	84	73		68	58	65		-18.9	-.473	**
Denmark	80			53	59		62	-17.9	-.387	*
Britain		77	76	73	72		61	-16.5	-.461	*
Greece		96					84	-12.3	-.364	-
West Germany		81	72	68	63	71	69	-12.0	-.305	N/s
Belgium			78	76	65		67	-11.2	-.487	N/s
Finland	83	83			61	73	72	-10.8	-.296	N/s
France	66	73	72	59	57		56	-10.1	-.263	N/s
Canada	95		89	91	85		88	-7.2	-.387	N/s
Switzerland		84			77	77		-7.2	-.277	N/s
India			98		93	94		-4.0	-.231	N/s
Japan			38	39	37	44	35	-3.0	-.016	N/s
Austria		85			78		83	-1.9	-.097	N/s
Italy			88	82	82		88	-0.1	.039	N/s
United States	94	98	94	96	93	94	94	0.4	-.027	N/s
Brazil	96				98	99		3.0	.056	N/s
ALL 10 1947-2001	85						72	-13.5	-.315	**

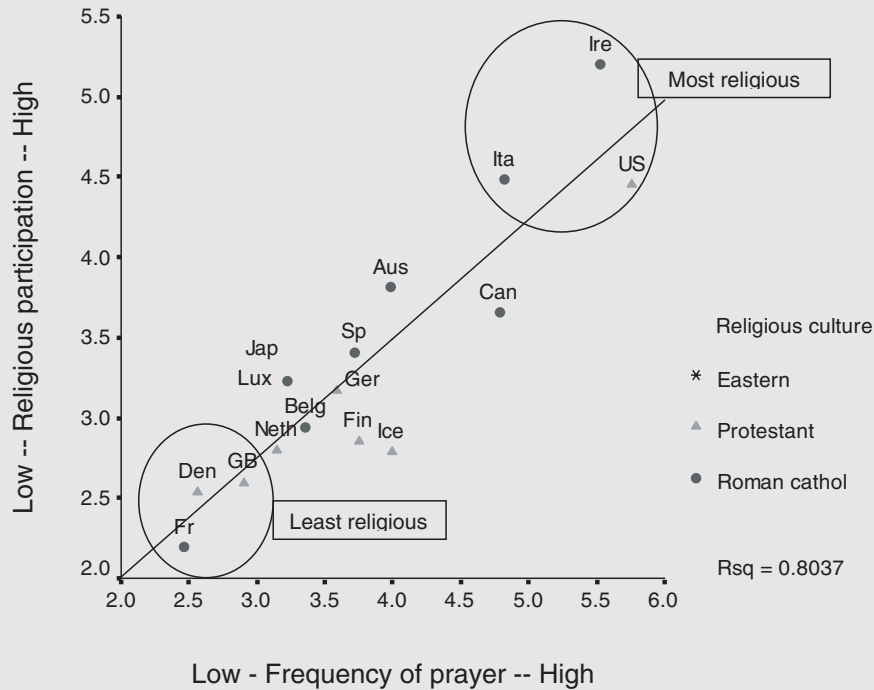
Notes: The proportion of the public who express belief in God (%'Yes') in 19 societies. 'Change' is the change in the proportion from the first to the last observation in the series. In the OLS regression models year is regressed on the series. The unstandardized beta (b) summarizes the slope of the line and the statistical significance of the change in the time-series (P). ALL-10 are the average means for the 10 nations with observations in both 1947 and 2001.

1947 Gallup Opinion Index "Do you, personally, believe in God?" Yes/No/Don't Know. 1968 Gallup Opinion Index "Do you believe in God?" Yes/No/Don't Know. 1975 Gallup Opinion Index "Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?" Yes/No/Don't Know. 1981-2001 World Values Survey/European Values Survey "Do you believe in God?" Yes/No/Don't Know.

the US, Ireland and Italy. At the other extreme, the most secular nations include France, Denmark and Britain. There is a fairly similar pattern across both indicators of religious behaviour, suggesting that both collective and individual forms of participation are fairly consistent in each society. Therefore although

religion in the US is distinctive among rich nations, it would still be misleading to refer to American 'exceptionalism', as so many emphasise, as though it were a deviant case from all other post-industrial nations, as we can observe similarities with both Ireland and Italy.

Figure 1: Religious behavior in post-industrial societies



Notes: 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." Mean frequency of attendance at religious services.

Frequency of prayer? Q199: "How often do you pray to God outside of religious services? Would you say...Every day (7), more than once a week (6), once a week (5), at least once a month (4), several times a year (3), less often (2), never (1)." Mean frequency per society.

Source: World Values Survey pooled 1981-2001.

Marked contrasts also exist between secular Northern Europe compared with the persistence of more regular churchgoing habits in Southern Europe, as well as differences within Central and Eastern Europe. The 'North-South' religious gap within the European Union is, admittedly, a puzzle that cannot be explained by the process of societal development alone, since these are all rich nations. More plausible explanations include the contemporary strength of religiosity in

Protestant and Catholic cultures, as well as societal differences in economic equality.

Trends in Secularisation in western Europe

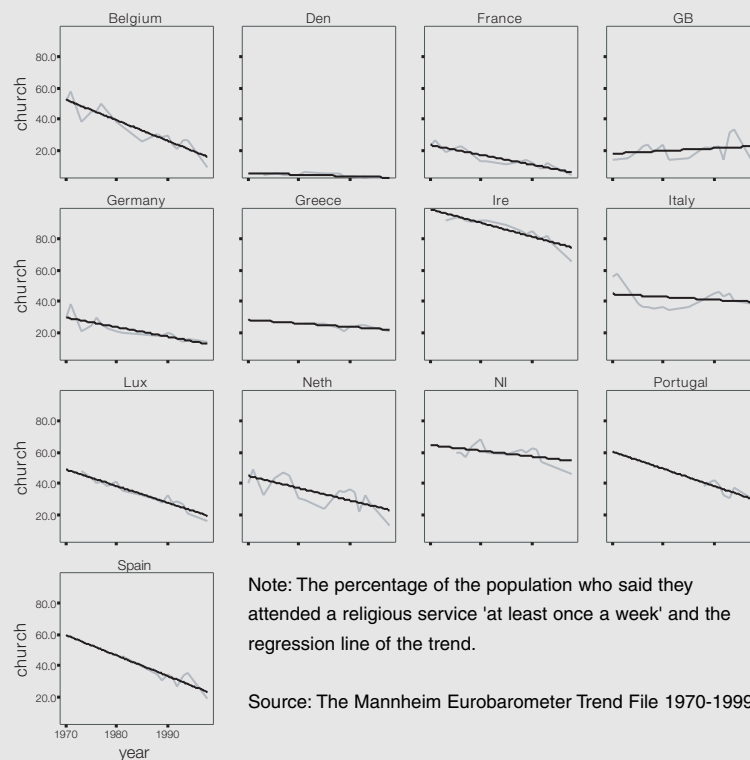
One reason for these cross-national variations could be that most post-industrial societies have experienced a significant erosion of religiosity during the post-war era, but that these trends have occurred from different starting points, in a path-dependent fashion,

due to the historic legacy of the religious institutions and cultures within each country. Where the church ends up today could depend in large part upon where it starts out.

We will demonstrate that the existing evidence in western Europe consistently and unequivocally shows two things. First, that traditional religious beliefs and involvement in institutionalised religion vary considerably from one country to another; and, second that

they have steadily declined throughout western Europe, particularly since the 1960s. Studies have often reported that many western Europeans have ceased to be regular churchgoers today outside of special occasions such as Christmas and Easter, weddings and funerals, a pattern especially evident among the young.² Numerous studies provide a wealth of evidence confirming similar patterns of declining religiosity found in many other post-

Figure 2: Religious participation in Western Europe, 1970-2000



- 2 R. Currie, A.D. Gilbert and L.Horsley, 1977. *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Sabino Samele Acquaviva. 1979. *The decline of the sacred in industrial society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell; Steve Bruce. 1996. *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Sheena Ashford and Noel Timms. 1992. *What Europe Thinks: A Study of Western European Values*. Aldershot: Dartmouth; Wolfgang Jagodzinski and Karel Dobbelaere. 1995. 'Secularization and Church Religiosity.' In *The Impact of Values*. Eds. Jan W. van Deth and Elinor Scarbrough. Oxford: Oxford University Press; L. Voye. 1999. 'Secularization in a context of advanced modernity.' *Sociology of Religion*. 60(3): 275-288; Höllinger F. 1996. *Volksreligion und Herrschaftskirche. Die Wurzeln Religiösen Verhaltens in Westlichen Gesellschaften*. Opladen: Leske und Budrich. For a challenge to this view, however, see Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge. 1985. 'A supply-side reinterpretation of the 'secularization' of Europe.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 33: 230-52.

industrial nations (Bruce 2002, Gustafsson 1994 and Riis 2003).

Trends in recent decades illustrate the consistency of the secularisation process irrespective of the particular indicator or survey that is selected. Figure 2 illustrates the erosion of regular church-attendance that has occurred throughout western Europe since the early 1970s. The fall is steepest and most significant in many Catholic societies, notably Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain (Abela 1993). To conclude, as Greeley does, that religion is “still relatively unchanged” in the traditional Catholic nations of Europe seems a triumph of hope over experience, and sharply at odds with the evidence (Greeley 2003). Marked contrasts in the strength of churchgoing habits remain clear. Nevertheless, all the trends point consistently downwards. Moreover the erosion of religiosity is not exclusive to western European nations; regular churchgoing also dropped during the last two decades in affluent Anglo-American nations such as Canada and Australia (Bibby 1979, Mol 1985 and McAllister 1988).

Another interpretation of these patterns is offered by those who emphasise that trends in churchgoing are interesting but also out of date, if religiosity has evolved and reinvented itself today as diverse forms of personal ‘spirituality’. Observers such as Wade Clark Roof suggest that collective engagement with religion in public life has eroded in America among the younger generation. Reasons for this are thought to include the declining status and authority of traditional church institutions and clergy, the individualisation of the quest for spirituality, and the rise of multiple New Age movements concerned with ‘lived religion’ (Clark Roof 2001 and Fuller 2002). These developments are exemplified by a revival of alternative spiritual

practices such as astrology, meditation, and alternative therapies, involving a diverse bricolage of personal beliefs. If similar developments are also evident in Europe, as a result public engagement with churches could have been replaced by a ‘private’ or ‘personal’ search for spirituality and meaning in life, making the practices, beliefs and symbols of religiosity less visible (Davie 1994). Moreover, beyond patterns of churchgoing, the trends in European religiosity can be regarded as complex. Greeley proposes that indicators of subjective beliefs in Europe, exemplified by faith in God or in life after death, display a mixed picture during the last two decades, rather than a simple uniform decline (Greeley 2003).

Yet we found that, far from divergent patterns, one reason for the decline in religious participation during the late twentieth century lies in the fact that during these years many common spiritual beliefs have indeed suffered considerable erosion in post-industrial societies. There is a consistent link between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ dimensions of religiosity. Table 1 shows that in 1947, eight out of ten people believed in God, with the highest levels of belief expressed in Australia, Canada, the US and Brazil. A fall in faith in God occurred across all but two nations (the US and Brazil). The decline proved sharpest in the Scandinavian nations, the Netherlands, Australia and Britain.

Trends in religiosity in the US

In the light of these European patterns, many have regarded the US as an outlier, although in fact the evidence remains somewhat ambiguous. At least until the late 1980s, analysis of trends in church attendance derived from historical records and from representative surveys commonly reported that the size of congregations in the US had remained stable

over decades. Studies published during the 1980s indicated that Protestant church attendance had not declined significantly in America; and, while it fell rapidly among Catholics from 1968 to 1975, it did not erode further in subsequent years (Greeley 1980 and 1985; Hout and Greeley 1998 and 1987). When measuring religiosity Gallup found that in March 1939, 40 per cent of American adults reported attending church the previous week, exactly the same figure they gave more than 60 years later (Lindsay 2000).

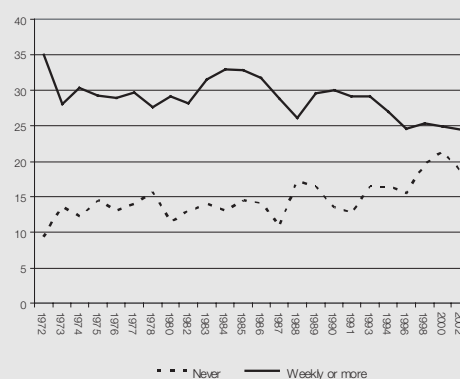
Yet there are serious difficulties encountered in obtaining reliable estimates of churchgoing from survey data. Woodberry and others compared aggregate data on levels of church attendance in America derived from counting participants at services against the available estimates of self-reported church-attendance derived from social surveys. They concluded that the self-reported figures are subject to systematic and consistent exaggeration, due to a social desirability bias concerning churchgoing in American culture (Woodberry 1996 and 1998; Presser and Stinson 1998).

Studies suggest that the Gallup organisation's procedures may systematically exaggerate attendance due to a lack of social desirability filters in the measurement of churchgoing and also unrepresentative sample completion rates based on a limited number of random digit dialing callbacks and respondent substitution (Woodberry 1998; Hadaway, Marler and Chaves 1998; Steensland, Park et al 2000). Other data suggests that these estimates may be inflated. For example the American National Election Survey (NES), conducted every two years since the late-1950s, suggests that weekly church attendance never rises much above 25 per cent in the US. Moreover, when the NES modified the question sequence to assure the social desirability of not attending, the

proportion reporting that they never attended church jumped from 12 per cent to 33 per cent and has stayed at that level in subsequent surveys. The US General Social Survey (GSS), conducted annually by NORC during the last three decades, also indicates that weekly church attendance in America hovers around the 25-30 per cent region, with a significant fall in church attendance occurring during the last decade. According to the GSS (see Figure 3), the proportion of Americans reporting that they attended church at least weekly fell to one quarter in the most recent estimate, while at the same time the proportion saying that they never attended church doubled to one fifth of all Americans (Hadaway, Marler and Chaves 1998).

Other indicators suggest that traditional religious participation may have eroded in the US, parallel to the long-term trends experienced throughout Europe. During the last decade, the main erosion occurred among American Protestants, while the proportion of Catholics in the population remained fairly

Figure 3: Religious participation in the United States, 1972-2002

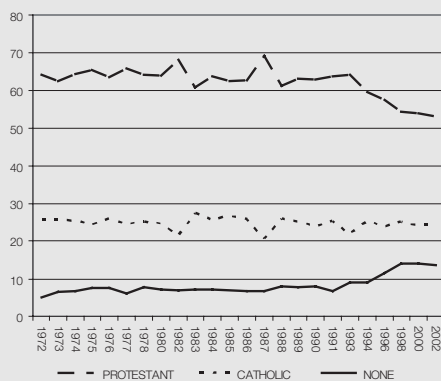


Note: Q: "How often do you attend religious services?"
Never/At least once a week or more often.

Source: US General Social Survey 1972-2002 N.43,204

steady, in part fuelled by a substantial influx of Hispanic immigrants with large families. At the same time, changes have occurred among denominations within the religious population in the US. Many studies report that congregations for newer evangelical churches have expanded their membership at the expense of 'mainline' Protestant denominations such as the United Methodist Church, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, in part due to changes in the American population and patterns of immigration from Latin America and Asia (Wuthnow 1988, Smith 1992, Hout, Greeley and Wilde 2001). Moreover, even where we have reliable estimates of churchgoing, Brian Wilson emphasises that little relationship may exist between these practices and spirituality, for example if church-going in America fulfils a need for social networking within local communities, and if US churches have become more secular in orientation (Wilson 1969).

Figure 4: Religious identities in the United States, 1972-2002



Note: "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?"
The graph excludes religious identities adhered to by less than 3% of Americans.

Source: US General Social Survey 1972-2002 N. 43,532

Despite the overall popularity of religion in the US, it would also be a gross exaggeration to claim that all Americans feel the same way, as important social and regional disparities exist. Secularists, for example, are far more likely to live in urban cities on the Pacific coast or in the north east, as well as to have a college degree, and to be single and male. Committed evangelicals are far more likely to live in small towns or rural areas, especially in the south and mid-west, as well as being female and married. These regional divisions proved important for politics: in the 2000 US presidential election for example, religion was by far the strongest predictor of who voted for George W. Bush and who voted for Al Gore (Kohut, Green et al 2000). The election result reflected strongly entrenched divisions in public opinion and values between social conservatives and liberals on issues such as approval of the use of the death penalty, reproductive rights and homosexuality. The regional patterns of religiosity are important and may even have led to two distinctive cultures within the US. For example, Himmelfarb argues that one culture in America is religious, puritanical, family-centred, patriotic, and conformist. The other is secular, tolerant, hedonistic, and multicultural. These cultures, she argues, coexist and tolerate each other, in part because they inhabit different worlds (Himmelfarb 1999).

We can conclude that the US remains one of the most religious in the club of rich countries, alongside Ireland and Italy, and indeed this makes America one of the most religious countries in the world. The pervasive importance of these values is apparent in many American practices, especially in public life (even prior to the Bush administration and 9/11), despite the strict division of church and state. In the same way, American cultural values

are more individualistic, more patriotic, more moralistic, and more culturally conservative than in Europe. Nevertheless there are some indicators that secular tendencies may have strengthened in America, at least during the last decade, which may bring the US slightly closer to public opinion in western Europe.

Explaining variations in religiosity

Given the existence of important and consistent cross-national variations in religiosity, what best explains these patterns? Our answer rests on patterns of human security and, in particular, conditions of socioeconomic inequality. What matters for societal vulnerability, insecurity, and risk, which we believe drive religiosity, are not simply levels of national economic resources, but their distribution as well. The growth of the welfare state in industrialised nations insures large sectors of the public against the worst risks of ill health and old age, penury and destitution, while private insurance schemes, the work of non-profit charitable foundations, and access to financial resources have transformed security in post-industrial nations, and also reduced the vital role of religion in people's lives. Even relatively affluent nations have multiple pockets of long-term poverty, whether afflicting unemployed African-Americans living in the inner cities of Los Angeles and Detroit, farm labourers in Sicily, or Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian émigrés in Leicester and Birmingham. Populations typically most at risk in industrialised nations, capable of falling through the welfare safety-net, include the elderly and children, single-parent female-headed households, the long-term disabled, homeless and unemployed, and ethnic minorities. If we are correct that feelings of vulnerability are driving religiosity, even in rich nations, then this should be evident by comparing levels of

economic inequality across societies, as well as by looking at how far religiosity is strongest among the poorer sectors of society.

The US is exceptionally high in religiosity in large part, we believe, because it is also one of the most unequal post-industrial societies under comparison. Exceptionally high levels of economic insecurity are experienced by many sectors of US society, despite American affluence, due to the cultural emphasis on the values of personal responsibility, individual achievement, and mistrust of big government, limiting the role of public services and the welfare state for basic matters such as healthcare covering all the working population. Despite private affluence for the well-off, many American families, even in the professional middle classes, face serious risks of loss of paid work by the main breadwinner, the dangers of sudden ill health without adequate private medical insurance, vulnerability to becoming a victim of crime, as well as the problems of paying for long-term care of the elderly. Americans face greater anxieties than citizens in other advanced industrialised countries about whether they will be covered by medical insurance, whether they will be fired arbitrarily, or whether they will be forced to choose between losing their job and devoting themselves to their newborn child. The entrepreneurial culture and the emphasis on personal responsibility have generated conditions of individual freedom and delivered considerable societal affluence, and yet one trade-off is that the US has greater income inequality than any other advanced industrial democracy (Bradley, Huber et al 2003). By comparison, despite recent pressures on restructuring, the secular Scandinavian and western European states remain some of the most egalitarian societies, with relatively high

levels of personal taxation, but also an expansive array of welfare services in the public sector, including comprehensive healthcare, social services and pensions (McFate, Lawson and Wilson 2005; Hicks 1999; Esping-Anderson 1999).

If this argument rested only on the cross-national comparisons then, of course, it would be too limited, as multiple other characteristics distinguish western Europe and the US. But evidence can also be examined by looking at how far the distribution of income relates to religious behaviour. The patterns show that religiosity is systematically related at individual level to the distribution of income groups in post-industrial societies: the poor are almost twice as religious as the rich.

No single indicator is ever sufficient by itself to confirm or refute the secularisation thesis, since the specific choice of measures and concepts always remains open to question, studies use alternative time periods and cross-national comparative frameworks, and often we lack the long-term evidence that would be more persuasive. Yet the range of evidence presented here in post-industrial societies serves to confirm the broader pattern established elsewhere. Secularisation is not a deterministic process but it is still one that is largely predictable, based on knowing just a few facts about levels of human development and socioeconomic equality in each country. Despite all the numerous possible explanatory factors that could be brought into the picture, from institutional structures, state restrictions on freedom of worship, the historical role of church-state relations, and patterns of denominational and church competition, the levels of societal and individual security in any society seems to provide the most persuasive and parsimonious explanation.

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