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## The American Religious Outlook

### An Examination of the Philosophical and Historical Forces behind Modern American Religious Beliefs

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#### Abstract

For one hundred and fifty years, the specter of secularization haunted philosophy, sociology, and religion. Only until research into contemporary realities and the historical record posed serious challenges to its empirical accuracy did secularization give way to more nuanced approaches in understanding religious trends. Religion in the United States presents a unique case: religion has been individualized by a shift from institutionally-regulated beliefs to those developed by and centered on adherents. The evolution of this American religious outlook began at the nation's inception and was catalyzed by the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Pragmatism of William James.

#### Introduction: The Religious Landscape of the United States

Each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding. (Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835)

[1] One hundred and seventy-four years have passed since de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* chronicled the dawn of the modern world's first individualist society. De Tocqueville wrote of individualism as "a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows" (193). His insights on the relationship between this American individualist spirit and religion seem almost prophetic, for they describe not only his own time, but the present as well: "Respecting all democratic tendencies not absolutely contrary to herself, and by making use of several of them for her own purposes, Religion sustains a successful struggle with the spirit of individual

independence which is her most dangerous opponent” (155). Today, data indicates that the United States populace embraces religion exactly as de Tocqueville envisioned. Not only is religiosity substantial, with between 69.5% (Kosmin: 8) and 92% (Pew Forum 2008b: 26) of Americans expressing a belief in God and 83.4% claiming membership in a religious denomination (Pew Forum 2008a: 10), but beliefs are shaped less by religious institutions and more by individual believers (in line with the “declining authority” theory of Demerath).

[2] Evidence of individuals reshaping religious doctrine abounds. While 70% of Americans believe “many religions can lead to eternal life,” at least half of the eleven major faiths and denominations in the United States officially profess a disagreement with such a notion (Pew Forum 2008b: 58). Conversely, only 81% of Protestants and 77% of Catholics believe in life after death despite such a doctrine being central to the theology of both denominations (26). Even more bizarrely, 21% of self-identified atheists responded that “yes,” they believe in “God or a universal spirit” (27), and the percentage of self-identified Christians is 6.5% higher than the percentage of American who profess belief in a personal God (Kosmin: 2, 8). More than one-in-five Christians (22%) say they believe in reincarnation (Pew Forum 2009c: 2), although “high levels of religious commitment are associated with lower levels of acceptance of Eastern or New Age beliefs” (Pew Forum 2009c: 8). Change in religious affiliation, an indication of significant individual involvement in religious life, has also become surprisingly common, with 28% of Americans stating they have changed their religious affiliation within their lifetimes (Pew Forum 2008a: 22). Rising profession of “unaffiliated” as a religious status, increasing membership in experiential faiths such as Pentecostalism (Pew Forum 2006: 2), and the decline in the number of self-identified Christians from 86% in 1990 to 76% in 2008 (Kosmin: 3) further suggest that rather than accepting institutionalized catechisms and confessions, twenty-first century Americans are redefining their religiosity on individual terms. These statistics further suggest that Americans have rejected the traditional religious paradigm, in which membership in a religious institution was assumed to include accepting that institution’s beliefs and practices. Instead, Americans have individualized their faiths, choosing their beliefs based on some combination of experience, emotion, and independent thought. How did this come to be? From where did Americans develop the idea that religion was something the individual could shape? Where did the relativism implicit in their modern day beliefs come from? Are there documentable precursors to the modern American religious outlook? American religious individualism, borne in the first decades of the United States and developed by American philosophers throughout the ensuing century, provides not only a philosophical framework for modern beliefs, but also a lens through which the trends which have brought about the present situation can be understood.

### **A Brief History of “Secularization”**

[3] The concept of secularization, the notion that religious belief was headed for a steady and largely inexorable decline, emerged from the philosophical developments of late Enlightenment positivism, most notably the Law of Three Stages (Gollin: 4). Contending that history was an essentially linear progression from chaos and primitivism to structure, order, and higher empirical thought, philosophers like Auguste Comte built the argumentative foundations for what would only much later, during the 1960s and 1970s,

become a distinct sociological theory attempting to ground itself in actual data (Swatos and Christiano: 210). The term “secularization” itself would not emerge until coined by Max Weber in 1930 (209).

[4] Comte’s Law of Three Stages neatly divided human history into three consecutive, ascending phases of intellectual development: the conjectural/theological, the metaphysical, and the positivistic/scientific. In the conjectural/theological stage, humankind ascribed what it could not understand to the work of conscious divine entities. During this stage, as Comte put it, “the human mind . . . supposes all phenomena to be produced by the immediate action of supernatural beings” (72). In this phase, then, belonged not only the ancient animistic and pagan religions, but the monotheistic ones which still dominated the society in which he lived. In the second stage, “the mind supposes . . . abstract forces . . . inherent in all beings, and capable of producing all phenomena” (72). Instead of conscious deities, philosophical abstractions and ideals are held to govern the universe. Finally, in the third, or scientific, stage, “the mind has given over the vain search after absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe, and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws” (72). The peak of intellectual maturity, in Comte’s vision, is the admission that human knowledge of the universe is limited to the study of its immediate reality. Questions beyond the scope of science are to be ignored because, as he rather condescendingly writes, such quests are “vain.”

[5] The Law of Three Stages, however, is thus not only a precursor to the formal theory of secularization, but a doctrine in and of itself, a step beyond sociology entirely. The Law proposes that religion, as a manifestation of “first stage” thought, will not only give way to more advanced and scientific thinking (a claim whose veracity could be determined through the analysis of data; Gollin 6), but is *inferior* to such thought (a claim whose veracity is based on an ideological stance). One of Comte’s contemporaries, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, explored this position’s philosophical implications, arguing that as a first stage mode of thought, religion must be cast aside (9): “It is not religion which makes man but on the contrary man who makes religion” (8). This early intertwining of the sociological claim about the popularity of religion and the philosophical claim of its falsehood, made not just by Comte and Proudhon but eventually by some sociologists themselves, would reemerge in criticisms from the secularization theory in the 1980s (Swatos and Christiano: 210).

[6] Max Weber brought secularization into modern thought as a term and a distinct sociological theory. “His studies convinced him that from the sixteenth century forward a process had been occurring in Western civilization as a result of which one after another sphere of life had become subject to the belief that explanations for events could be found within this-worldly experience and the application of human reason” (Swatos and Christiano: 212). As rational thought came to prominence, people became disenchanted with religious explanations for worldly affairs, and it was to this process that Weber gave the name secularization. This is, notably, quite distinct from what European and American sociologists would later morph the term into meaning; for Weber, secularization described the declining value and influence of appeals to religious authority, not strictly (or necessarily) a decline in membership in religious institutions or belief in higher powers (Swatos and Christiano: 212). Secularization as a claim about the inevitable decline of religion would not emerge as a widely popular theory until the late 1950s in the United States, becoming “the reigning

dogma in the field” by the first few years of the 1970s with the support of various prominent sociologists (210).

[7] It is this latter meaning of secularization, rather than Weber’s view, which gradually came under fire. As a claim about a historical trend, secularization had to be proven comparatively; not only did modern data have to demonstrate low religiosity, but evidence from the past had to demonstrate some kind of comparatively high level of religiosity. While religiosity in modern Europe might provide some support for the first required branch of evidence, this would not only be called into question by the evidence from the United States, but also from challenges to the validity of the latter claim – some, notably Swatos and Christiano, have even contended that the Middle Ages did not feature an “Age of Faith” from which we have since declined (219). Simply put, “Virtually no empirical research supports the prediction of a societal slide from a peak of sacrality into a valley of secularity” (Swatos and Christiano: 216). As *The Churching of America* points out, membership in a religious institution went from 17% during the American Revolution to 34% in 1850, and this 34% level is about half that of today. These two jumps, from 1776 to 1850 and from 1850 to 1999, each display a 100% increase of membership in religious institutions. Particularly in America, the historical case for a simple, linear decline into a non-religious society cannot stand.

[8] Weber’s insights, however, deserve renewed consideration. The authority of religious *institutions*, as Mark Chaves has expressed it, may be what is actually in decline (749). Chaves’ theory, if accurate, would suggest the existence of a diverse, pluralistic religious environment marked by individualism, as believers take the liberty to develop their own beliefs outside the strictly maintained doctrines of religious institutions. In the United States, at least, this seems to be the case.

### Persistent Theism

[9] The persistence of theism as a fundamental component of the American religious landscape is the first major testimony to the inadequacy of the secularization theory whose philosophical origin was the Law of Three Stages. The contention that religion was on its way out, so dominant in the 1960s and 1970s, crumbles in the face of a society in which more than 92% of people believe in God (Pew Forum 2008b: 26). Certainly, as the Pew Forum notes, the number of respondents stating they are unaffiliated with any religion has risen 8.8% over the last generation (Pew Forum 2008a: 22). The results of the American Religious Identification Survey of 2008, indicating a nearly seven percent increase in the number of Americans with a religious identification of “none,” seem equally troubling to the health of theism. However, beneath this remains the fact that 70% of religiously unaffiliated Americans believe in God. Unaffiliation simply does not equate to atheism. Although religion and religious belief and adherence have taken on a very unique character in the modern United States, theism remains largely intact.

[10] This failure of secularization theory is as astounding as the extent to which early writers on America, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, understood how essential belief in God was to American life. Although his seminal work, *Democracy in America*, occasionally displays a disdainful attitude towards the American worldview and way of life, de Tocqueville captured the enduring framework in which Americans conduct religious and philosophical discourse,

and his insights are crucial to understanding the unique stature and relevance of theism in the United States.

[11] For de Tocqueville, American life was shaped by the leveling influence of democracy. A society which was largely devoid of rigid hierarchies, whether political, social, or economic, bred a sense of equality; he held this process, in turn, responsible for the individualism he found pervading American life and thought (150-56). Notably, he did not contend that this resulted in anarchy. On the one hand, Americans “accept tradition only as a means of information,” the “only” seemingly implying a contrast to the reverence with which tradition was held outside of America. Further, Americans “seek the reason of things for [themselves] . . . and in [themselves] . . . alone,” and “Each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding” (143). On the other hand, despite this audacious individualism, de Tocqueville noted that American thought was shaped by certain guidelines, most significantly that it operated within the confines of Christianity. Christianity, he wrote, is “an established and irresistible fact” (145). For a land in which people neither revere tradition nor seek much understanding beyond their own minds, this is remarkable. The one apparently immutable reality of American thought and discourse was *theism*. The uniquely American introduction of individual, rational thought did not result, in de Tocqueville’s opinion, in the abandonment of Christianity or religion. Rather, it bred frequent denominational fragmentation and converted religion from a set of doctrines and rituals to be puritanically adhered to into a framework for debate and diversity (145).

### New Religious Movements

[12] The second blow to Enlightenment secularization theory is dealt by New Religious movements (NRMs), religious or spiritual traditions that have emerged within modern societies during the last few decades – within the United States, independent religious movements have been emerging since the beginning of the nineteenth century. But why are these NRMs important? NRMs stand out when contrasted with “traditional” religions, for their histories are considerably shorter and their followers are considerably fewer. However in the United States two NRMs, Pentecostalism and Mormonism, are increasingly potent forces in the religious and political community and, more pertinently, have risen in sharp defiance of the Enlightenment secularization worldview.

[13] Pentecostalism, a highly experiential branch of evangelical Protestant Christianity, took shape as a formal denomination under the banner of the Assemblies of God in 1914 (Bloom: 183-84). Today, however, it has taken the lead among Christian denominations in expansion rate and fervor. The Pew Forum reports that “within Christianity, Pentecostal and related renewalist or Spirit-filled movements are by all accounts among the fastest growing” (2006: 1). Marked by its strong affirmation that “such practices as speaking in tongues, prophesying, divine healing and other miraculous signs of the Spirit are as valid today as they were in the early church” (1), Pentecostalism is a religion whose experientialism lends itself to deep personal involvement from individual adherents. Indeed, Pentecostals are related to a broader Christian subgroup known as Charismatics who are defined by their personal experience of the “in-filling” of the Holy Spirit itself. Pentecostalism’s inclusion of the religious experiences of its individual practitioners affords them a unique degree of individualism.

[14] The experiential nature of Pentecostalism means that Pentecostals are considerably more fervent than their fellow Christians and most other religious groups of any kind in the United States. Pentecostals are far more ardent in their belief in the divine origin of the Bible, as 76% of Pentecostals and 48% of Charismatics believe it is the word of God and should be taken literally compared to only 37% of other Christians (Pew Forum 2006: 6). Such faith-based theological traits would, from the perspective of Enlightenment secularization theory, condemn Pentecostalism to a small following and a gradual decline as modernization increased and society advanced. The movement stands out, however, precisely because its growth, size, fervor, and conservatism defy the theory's predictions. Pentecostalism's two main denominations, the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ, together represent around one-fourth of all Christians in the United States, making Pentecostalism the world's second-largest Christian group (Pew Forum 2006: 1). The rapidity of its growth, concludes the Pew Forum, "will almost certainly guarantee that the movement will be a major force in shaping . . . the religious landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (2006: 2). This growth defies secularization theory, for more people are accepting beliefs that would require even more faith, such as the reality of divine healings, direct personal revelations from God, and exorcisms (2006: 5).

[15] Mormons, too, display the fervor and conservatism that mark Pentecostals. Although they make up just 1.7% of the American population, expansion is imminent, for about three-fourths of them are married, half have children living at home, and 21% have three or more children living at home. Further, Mormons are tightly united: 96% belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the first denomination to emerge out of Joseph Smith's teachings in the 1840s. Notably, more than one-fourth of Mormons are converts, individuals who have chosen to join the faith (Pew Forum 2009b: 1-5).

[16] Like Pentecostals, Mormons are extremely active in their faith, displaying "exceptionally high levels of religious commitment" (Pew Forum 2009b: 6). A full 100% say they believe in God (which, although seemingly expected from of any denomination, is actually a uniquely high level of belief) and 91% say the Bible is God's word (Pew Forum 2009b: 7). Absolutists on morals and scripture, 88% of Mormons contend there is an absolute right and wrong (Pew Forum 2009b: 13). The Mormon faith is experiential as well – 55% of Mormons claim they receive a direct answer to a specific prayer at least once a month (Pew Forum 2009b: 9). Mormon attendance of religious services is second only to that of Jehovah's Witnesses, and 98% of Mormons believe in life after death (Pew Forum 2009b: 8).

[17] What emerges from this examination of these two growing New Religious Movements is that conservative, experiential religion – precisely the kind that belongs in the first stage of Comte's hierarchy – remains a potent, growing force in the American religious community. Not only are new denominations continuing to be born, but those which are most rapidly gaining and holding converts are those whose appeals are directly to the individual's experience and values. Intense emphasis on prayers and faith healings exemplifies the kind of religious experientialism that Comte and the Enlightenment secularization theorists were certain would be rejected. Their recent growth and popularity signal that individual religious paradigms and desires, rather than societal modernizing forces, remain the dominant powers shaping the American religious outlook.

[18] Why, though, has religion developed this way? Why do new religions continue to emerge? Why did theism persist? The answer is that American individualism radically transformed not only religious beliefs, but the lens through which religion, its meaning, and its purposes were viewed.

### **Individualism**

[19] While it is certainly clear that theism has not died in America, it is equally clear that individuals have considerably deviated from the official doctrines of the faiths with which they identify, reshaping their religions to meet their own beliefs and spiritual needs. Today, only 81% of Protestants and 77% of Catholics believe in life after death (Pew Forum 2008b: 32), startlingly low figures when one considers the centrality of that doctrine to Christian theology. Even more surprising, an examination of the three Abrahamic monotheisms reveals that only 98% of Protestants, 97% of Catholics, 92% of Muslims, and 83% of Jews believe in a God (26).

[20] We can begin to understand this transformation of religion from rigid creed to loose identity framework by looking at the innovations in the modern Catholic Church. Helen Ebaugh has insightfully chronicled how the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council transformed Catholic identity far more than was initially intended. In the decades after the Council, Ebaugh wrote, “rather than looking to the priest and hierarchy above them to define what it means to be Christian, lay Catholics began to look to their own consciences and life situations for spiritual discernment” (3). Although she was writing about the religious lives of American Catholics, Ebaugh might just as well have been describing the transformation of all religions in the United States. “Religion,” she concluded, “has become highly personalized as the autonomy of individual conscience has replaced official pronouncements of morality” (7).

[21] In the United States, however, the history of this perspective on religious identity and beliefs goes further than the last few decades, and is traceable to Ralph Waldo Emerson who, in the words of Larzer Ziff, “occupies the very center of the American intellectual tradition” (Emerson: 7), for his work marked the beginning of the individualization that has continued through the modern era. Emersonian Transcendentalism marked the birth of a unique American philosophical tradition, yet it did so without departing from the images and identity of America’s Christian heritage. Examined not merely as a philosophy itself, but as a shift in the theology of American Protestantism, Emersonian Transcendentalism emerges as the movement whose combination of individualism and Christianity set the stage for, and yields great insight into, the theological views of modern Americans.

[22] Emerson’s philosophy must be viewed within the context of Christianity largely because it began as a revolt against the excesses and failures of institutional Protestantism. At the time of his seminal “Divinity School Address,” given in 1838, Emerson felt historical Christianity was in decline. “Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead,” he lamented (116), further informing his audience that “From the views I have already expressed, you will infer [my] sad conviction . . . of the universal decay and now almost death of faith in society. The soul is not preached. The Church seems to totter to its fall, almost all life extinct” (117). His criticism, however, was directed at “the Church,” not Christianity. The true message of Jesus was weakened, he

argued, because churches came to accept, “the injurious impositions of . . . early catechetical instruction” (114), and because superficial, titular identification with Christianity became more important than upright conduct. Emerson laid the blame for declining piety and the dilution of Jesus’ message squarely on contemporary religious institutions, which he held responsible for distorting true Christianity into “an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual” (114).

[23] The truly radical elements of Emerson’s assault on the theological establishment were his claims about just how it had deviated from what he regarded as the true message of Jesus Christ. Emerson did not merely criticize the ritualization and superficiality of “the Church,” he claimed it had fundamentally misunderstood the afterlife, the nature of God, and the identity of Jesus. Heaven and hell were not the eternal places of reward or punishment to which God sent humans based on some judgment of the overall merit of their lives, but rather the environments good and bad individuals formed naturally. “As we are, so we associate. The good, by affinity, seek the good; the vile, by affinity, the vile. Thus of their own volition, souls proceed into heaven, into hell” (110). He continues this mystical reading of Christianity by defining God not as the omnipotent, omniscient overseer and judge of humanity, but as a “rapid intrinsic energy” that “worketh everywhere.” “By it,” he proclaimed, “a man is made the Providence to himself, dispensing good to his goodness, and evil to his sin” (109). Emerson has transformed Christianity from a religion in which an omnipotent *God* rules over *men* into one in which the forces of human nature empower *men* to rule over *themselves*. Jesus was not the savior of humankind because he brought the good news of God’s decision to liberate men from sin, he saved men because “Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. . . He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world” (113). For Emerson, the individual’s spiritual quest was not a journey towards God, but a journey towards *becoming* God. “Obey thyself” became Transcendentalism’s single commandment (115).

[24] The implications of so radical an individualism were vast, and Emerson not only understood them, he proclaimed them throughout his major addresses under three unspoken categories: moral, doctrinal, and theological. By interpreting morality as a means of improving an individual’s character (“He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled,” his Divinity School Address asserted) rather than a code of “correct” ethical conduct, Emerson placed judgment of the ethical value of an action in the hands of the actor himself. “What I must do is all that concerns me,” he wrote elsewhere (180). In this ethical system, the only entity that can tell you what to do is your conscience, and therefore an individual’s behavior can only be criticized by that same individual. And while Emerson was fully aware that having morality revolve around each and every individual would lead to charges of antinomianism, he felt confident that this was justified as long as “the law of consciousness [i.e. one’s conscience] abides” (193).

[25] Emerson was equally convinced that doctrine must be the product of the same individual who believes it, confident that those who tapped into their intuitions and the power of nature would find truth. Unafraid of paradox, Transcendentalism rings with such proclamations as, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is genius” (Emerson: 175). Every individual is a “divine idea,” and the prophets of the Bible ought to be revered not for their unique stature

as those who communicated directly with God, but for their individuality and determination to say what they believed (Emerson: 176).

[26] Even the identity of God came to center on the individual, for instead of the traditional deity, Emerson insisted that God was merely, “that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, [where] all things find their common origin” (187). This deity is no longer conscious; it cannot, therefore, issue commandments, judge people, or be worshiped in anything even vaguely resembling the traditional manner. Overall, Emerson was more concerned with ensuring moral and doctrinal harmony within individuals than within societies, and it was this outlook which generated this astounding break from the Unitarian environment of his early years.

[27] The influence of Emerson’s ideas cannot be assessed simply by looking at how many people share them today. His greatest contribution was not his eloquently expounded theories and philosophy, but rather the way these ideas interacted with and reshaped mainstream American beliefs. As Larzer Ziff writes, “Orthodox Protestantism was officially outraged by Emerson’s ideas, but these ideas drew considerable strength from the protest tradition within *Protestantism*,” and it was this co-opting and infiltration of American religion that established such a lasting legacy for him (Emerson: 24-25). His success was also aided by an American populace whose understanding of religion’s purpose meshed well with his ideas. De Tocqueville wrote that Americans viewed religion through a three-pronged framework: religion should give meaning and purpose to daily life, provide the basis for a vibrant intellectual discourse, and remain “within its own precincts” (150-52). This perspective on the role of religion would foreshadow the similar attitude explored several decades later by William James.

[28] The example of Transcendentalism provides a lens through which the kind of theological innovations of today can be understood. Although the American religious identity has always been defined by an individualist streak, it is also firmly rooted in moral theism, the lasting influence of Christianity.

### **Individualism Enables Universalism: William James’ Pragmatism**

[29] William James’ 1902 work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* transformed the American philosophical perspective on religion, defining the religious sphere in exclusively individualist terms and cementing the unique American perspective on religion’s purpose and meaning. James began with the revolutionary: “religion shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (31). With this definition the traditionally communitarian and social nature of religion was eliminated, as was the notion that religious doctrine could or should be studied and examined. In James’ view, “religion” is the experience and results of an individual’s interaction with what he or she believes is supernatural; the result of such a position, then, is that institutions and doctrinal texts can no longer claim an objective purpose based on historical or revelatory stature. Instead, their importance is correlated with the extent to which individuals find them useful. James himself recognized this, and explicitly argued that the truth of a religious text cannot be determined by its historicity or provable divine origins, but instead can only be assessed by its effects on believers (15-18). All three of James’ standards for evaluating religious truth (“immediate

luminousness,” “philosophical reasonableness,” and “moral helpfulness”) make the individual its sole arbiter, and in so doing, mark the most important stage in the evolution of religious individualism in the United States (18).

[30] For James, the shift towards a conception of religion as an experiential individualist, rather than communitarian, phenomenon stemmed from the difficulties of defending its legitimacy through the latter lens. The religious institutions and texts of early twentieth century America were steadily being undermined by historical, literary, and naturalist criticism, raising numerous questions about the nature of the truth they claimed to possess. It was in response to this, then, that James made the audacious and groundbreaking claim that the nature of a subject and the meaning of a subject were not necessarily correlated (4). By doing so, he intended to blunt the force of those who contended that the exposure of the Bible as a man-made document somehow weakened Christianity’s claim to truth (4-5), for if the truth of a religion could only be measured by its value to believers, the history of a religious text would be irrelevant to the truth of said text. Further attacks on religion were being mounted by naturalists, who, through a position called “medical materialism,” argued that religious beliefs were the results of random variations in human physiology such as diseases. To counter this position, James used naturalist logic to reason that all coconscious activity was the result of human physiology, and that therefore this said nothing about truth either (14). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, born out of James’ clash with historicists and naturalists, removed religion into the untouchable realm of the subjective, providing the philosophical foundation for the religious beliefs of Americans today.

[31] Aside from reinvigorating religious individualism, James’ work also provided the intellectual justification for the universalism that has become visible in modern data on religious beliefs. Today, 70% of Americans believe that many religions can lead to eternal life (Pew Forum 2008b: 58), despite the fact that the doctrines of the majority of American religions explicitly disagree. Furthermore, the rise in nondenominational Protestantism (Pew Forum 2008b: 22) and a religiously unaffiliated population of whom 70% believe in God (Pew Forum 2008b: 26) suggest a trend towards individual emphasis on common beliefs rather than a strict adherence to institutionally-upheld dogma. These figures make far more sense in a pragmatist paradigm than in one in which religious beliefs, and their implications, must be taken more literally. If it is acknowledged that the individual is the arbiter of religious truth, and accepted that religion is as much a tool for happiness as a cache of information, than tolerance of the beliefs of others and a shift towards non-denominationalism are quite justifiable. Even the most bizarre of all recent statistics, the Pew Forum report that 21% of atheists believe in “God or a universal spirit” (2008b: 27) is somewhat explicable in this light, for while an individual could reject the existence of the traditional deity (and thus identify as an atheist), this same individual could find belief in such a being to be a good thing in and of itself, capable of raising ethical standards or contentment, and therefore identify with this aspect of belief.

[32] James’ pragmatic approach to religion is also intellectually conducive to a society in which changes in religious identification are common. Again, if religion is a utility whose “results” prove its worth, than a 28% rate of change in religious affiliation (Pew Forum 2008a: 22) merely testifies to a widespread attention to the level of fulfillment one is attaining as a member of a given religion. Ultimately, whether because of James’ arguments

or as a testimony to their insight into the American religious worldview, the American religious worldview has evolved with an individualism and universalism that strongly reflect a pragmatist's outlook.

### Sociological Reform

[33] Sociologists have recognized that Emersonian Transcendentalism, Jamesian Pragmatism, and empirical evidence necessitate reconsidering the validity of Enlightenment secularization theory. As noted earlier, although Weber introduced secularization as a sociological term in 1930, it did not become popular amongst American sociologists until the 1960s and 1970s, during which time the social turmoil that rocked the United States undoubtedly contributed to its rapid acceptance. The coincidence of an iconoclastic socio-religious movement and the adoption of Enlightenment secularization theory intriguingly reflects its earlier history, for it was an even more philosophically disruptive movement – the Enlightenment itself – which spurred the development of secularization theory in the first place. In both its peaks of popularity, it seems that the *zeitgeist* often overshadowed the existence, or lack thereof, of the necessary evidence for secularization theory's validity.

[34] The rapidity with which secularization was accepted in the 1960s and 1970s subjected it to intense scrutiny in the later years of the '70s and throughout the '80s. A 1978 case study on the town of Muncie, Indiana, revealed that religiosity had dramatically *increased* since 1924 (Swatos and Christiano: 215). Research pointed to one startling conclusion: almost no evidence held up the anticipation of “a societal slide from a peak of sacrality into a valley of secularity” (Swatos and Christiano: 216). Particularly as historians delved into the historical record, the linear model of religious decline proved entirely untenable. Jeffrey Hadden addressed the Southern Sociological Society in 1986 to argue that secularization was “a doctrine more than it [was] a theory,” an idea contaminated by an environment of “deep and abiding antagonism to religious belief” (588). Secularization theory consisted, he said, of “presuppositions that . . . represent a taken for granted ideology rather than a systematic set of interrelated propositions” (588). Hadden forcefully argued that the theory had failed on four counts, insisting that secularization theory was logically flawed, that empirical research had not verified its predictions despite decades of investigation, that New Religious Movements suggested “religion may really be ubiquitous in human cultures,” and that religion held a central and expanding role in political conflicts across the globe (598).

[35] Gordon Graham's 1992 paper, “Religion, Secularization, and Modernity,” took another step in Hadden's direction, identifying secularization's damning flaw in its inextricability from a philosophical antagonism towards religion and the sort of overly simplistic, linear reading of history he found best expressed by Hegel (184). Graham sought to break down the “myth of secularization,” and identified the notion that religion was condemned to fall due to the advancement of reason with the Hegelian concept of a “progressive history” (and mentioned Comte's similar idea as well) (185). In this framework, provided by Marx and accepted by other proponents of secularization, religion only claimed utility, and in their view, technological advancement had removed its utility, condemning it to collapse (Graham: 189). Although Graham noted that the “inevitable decline” aspect of the Hegelian/Marxist framework had been largely rejected by his contemporaries, he contended

that the notion of religion as solely something to be examined for its utility remained prominent in religious sociology – a consequence, perhaps, of the work of William James.

[36] Most importantly, Graham affirmed that empirical evidence did not support Enlightenment secularization, particularly because individual levels of belief could not be assessed before the twentieth century (186-87). Further, the theory was too loosely posed to permit a consistent examination of the evidence in a Hegelian framework, particularly because it permitted its supporters to almost arbitrarily place some evidence above other evidence in importance. Like Hadden, Graham concluded that the “myth of secularization” could only be argued from a stance that already accepted several highly disputable premises, and therefore a theory encompassing merely data and devoid of a philosophical agenda remained, in his view, critically necessary (186-88).

[37] In 1994, Mark Chaves brought forth that theory, fundamentally realigning religious sociology with empirical realities and initiating the creation of a more nuanced, dynamic, and accurate understanding of the relationships between religion and its practitioners. He argued that “secularization” was a term best used as a description of the weakening influence of religious institutions – not the weakening of the religious vitality of individuals or societies (750). Such a perspective would enable sociologists to account for divergent trends in religiosity while still being able to draw a conclusion about the changes in the social role of religion today. Chaves contended that religious authority controls “desired goods” of a spiritual nature, and the adherence of people to that authority reflect the degree to which that authority can be called legitimate (755-56). In reality, then, secularization is a multifaceted process, comprised of “laicization” (separation of the non-religious world from religious institutions), “internal secularization” (the shifting nature of religious organizations towards alignment with political structures), and “religious disinvolvement” (the decline of individual participation in religion) (757). Enlightenment secularization’s thrust was directed at the third of these elements, and by conflating a decline in religious participation with a decline in religious belief, it had overstepped the bounds of sociological study.

[38] Graham and Chaves’ papers paved the way for a decade of reform in the sociological community. David Yamane and N. J. Demerath explored the relationship between individuals and religious identity and choice, filling the final major gap in the new set of theories. As the 1990s came to a close, the secularization theory that had emerged more than a century before had fallen.

### **Conclusion: On Religious Outlook**

The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture (R. Albert Mohler, Jr., quoted in Meacham).

[39] Enlightenment secularization theory and all of its associates (from the Law of Three Stages to the sociologists of the sixties and seventies) must depart from discourse on the fate of religiosity in the United States. Their prophecy of the end of religion and the death of belief in God proved to be more fantasy than reality, more desire than empirical fact. Hopelessly entangled with the biases and worldviews of its creators from its inception, secularization theory stood no chance against the complex, diverse, and truly unique history

of religio-philosophical thought in the United States. The ideas of Comte and Proudhon, the two Enlightenment thinkers most responsible for the rise of “Enlightenment secularization theory,” have been proven hollow.

[40] Theism remains alive, despite a slight decline over the last few decades. The “unaffiliated,” the nation’s most rapidly expanding religious identity, are not uniformly atheist, nor even anti-religious. They constitute a surprisingly vibrant community of Americans whose beliefs and experiences make their own valuable contribution to our religious outlook. Individualism and universalism, meanwhile, have become so interwoven with traditional religious thought that membership in a religious institution is more a cultural than dogmatic identity, especially in Catholicism (as demonstrated by the work of Helen Ebaugh). De Tocqueville’s words still ring true: “Respecting all democratic tendencies not absolutely contrary to herself, and by making use of several of them for her own purposes, Religion sustains a successful struggle with the spirit of individual independence which is her most dangerous opponent” (155). Sociologists, led by Mark Chaves and N. J. Demerath among others, have finally recognized that the authority of, and participation in, religious institutions, rather than religious beliefs, are the only aspects of the religious world actually on the wane. Admitting that laicization and “internal secularization” were indeed taking place, Chaves concluded that “religious disinvolvement,” the withdrawal of individuals from religious belief and participation, could not be demonstrated.

[41] Has the United States become the post-religious society of which Comte dreamed and the religious feared? With new religious movements like Pentecostalism and Mormonism on the rise, and the percentage of the population with membership in a religious institution up 200% since 1776, it is hard to answer in the affirmative (Swatos and Christiano: 216). However, de Tocqueville, Emerson, and James have taught us that it is impossible to reject the notion that there is a distinctly individualist quality to religiosity and religious beliefs in the United States that places its people well outside the traditional religious paradigm. Perhaps America has always, in some sense, been a religiously individualist society.

[42] In April 2009, *Newsweek* magazine’s cover story announced “The End of Christian America” (Meacham). The article’s subtitle was quite telling: “The percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 points in the past two decades. How that statistic explains who we are now – and what, as a nation, we are about to become.” Can the truth about a nation’s religious outlook be discovered in a single statistic? Are the implications of the statistics, let alone the beliefs of the American people, truly so straightforward and uniform? Many who discard the banner of Christianity do not also discard all of its components. Statistics can only go so far, and history, philosophy, and sociological theory can often provide interpretations that challenge, rather than confirm, the surface-level meaning of the data.

[43] Yes – identification with Christianity is in slow but measurable decline, but no – this has not and will not redefine the religious outlook of the American people. As Meacham writes, “If we apply an Augustinian test of nationhood to ourselves, we find that liberty, not religion, is what holds us together . . . What we value most highly – what we collectively love most – is thus the central test of the social contract.” What does this mean, then, for the American religious outlook? Meacham concludes, “judging from the broad shape of

American life in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we value individual freedom and free (or largely free) enterprise, and tend to lean toward libertarianism on issues of personal morality.” Today, he argues, the individual lies at the heart of the American worldview.

[44] Yet critically, and perhaps surprisingly, this has always been the case. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the 1830s, was convinced that the foundation of a society free of traditional European hierarchies, as the United States was, virtually ensured that individualism and egalitarianism would define that society’s values. Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing only a few years later, was convinced that God resided within every man, and that “Obey thyself” was the world’s lone universal commandment. William James concluded the nineteenth century by declaring that religion could not even exist outside the realm of individual experience, and established three entirely subjective criteria that defined the truth of a religious doctrine by the benefits it provided to the believer. While the extent to which these men spoke for their times will never be certain – for all, unfortunately, wrote before much effective demographic data could be collected – it is undeniable that they speak for ours. These thinkers forged and shepherded the religious perspective of all Americans – the “cultural crisis” feared by the most fervent members of our contemporary religious community (Meacham) is nothing but the realization of visions seen long ago.

[45] The fundamental change is actually a slow, evolutionary one: the increasingly open American rejection of the traditional religious paradigm – that superficially simple and logical notion that membership in a religious institution implied complete adherence to its creeds and rituals. Perhaps as the result of better data-collecting, perhaps as the result of actual changes – more likely as the result of some combination of the two – the empirical evidence suggests that the only “dogma” most Americans accept is the sovereignty of the individual. We have abandoned dogmatic adherence in favor of individual experience; we have abandoned barriers in favor of universalism. If any sense is to be made of the data on American beliefs, we must conclude that, as a whole, Americans are likely to hold true that which they find most useful or pleasant for themselves.

[46] To deny that there is a “cultural crisis” of the kind feared by Mohler is not, however, to entirely discard the insights gleaned from such a perspective; indeed, for the significant segment of the population that still adheres to the traditional religious paradigm, the societal rejection of religious dogmatism may truly be a “crisis.” The liberties of individualism permit, ironically, religious conservatism to continue in the hearts and minds of whomever it makes happy, of whomever it guides. For these Americans, the world “after” the traditional religious paradigm is a bleak and incomprehensible one: “The post-Christian narrative,” says R. Alfred Mohler, “is radically different; it offers spirituality, however defined, without binding authority. . . It is based on an understanding of history that presumes a less tolerant past and a more tolerant future, with the present as an important transitional step” (quoted in Meacham). The decline of religious authority appears, to him, at least, to have a touch of anarchy about it – and indeed, in a world where 35% of all adults attend religious services at multiple places (and 24% attend services of different faiths), there is a compelling reason for supporters of the traditional paradigm to be concerned (Pew Forum 2009c: 1).

[47] Curiously, Mohler’s description of the “post-Christian” view of history stands on a fallacy similar to that which undermined the Law of Three Stages: it establishes an over-

simplified, linear model of historical progress whose veracity could only be accepted through ideology and could never be demonstrated empirically. It may simply be a natural human tendency to write history in such straight, predictable (and in this case somewhat apocalyptic) lines. However, if there is anything we must learn from the religio-philosophical history of the American people, it is that they have never been long restrained by laws and lines. Philosophical narratives – ideologically-driven paradigms on history and societal development – are unlikely to adequately withstand the test of time or the test of evidence. Mohler’s claim is far more revealing of his own fears than of the potential future of religion in America.

[48] Sociological examination of religion must avoid such linear historical models at all costs. Ideology must remain as far away from those who collect and examine empirical data as is possible. Trends in religious beliefs, the products of individual desires and needs, cultural fads, and persisting fragments of tradition, simply cannot be foreseen. Today’s scholars of religiosity and religious belief must limit themselves to what is firmly in their grasp but has been overlooked for decades: the central perspective, what I have called “the religious outlook,” of societies and cultures. Developed throughout history, catalyzed by great thinkers, but ultimately defined by individuals, a religious outlook is the only primary lens through which the views of an entire people can be understood.

[49] The American religious outlook is defined by the individualism and equality that have shaped American politics, literature, and culture as a whole. The birth of a nation “conceived in Liberty,” as Lincoln so grandly put it, signaled the birth of a people whose religious views would always be distinctly *theirs*, and not those of the institutions that governed them. And even though individualism has only begun to visibly reshape the traditional religious paradigm, the universalism, experientialism, and spiritualism that define the uniquely American religious outlook are testaments to its unwavering vitality and promising future.

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