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Christianity and Its American Fate: Where History Interrogates Secularization Theory

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IS THE MOST Christianity-affirming society in the industrialized world an example of “American exceptionalism,” or is the vaunted secularity of Western Europe the exception to a rule of ongoing religious affirmation and even renewal that applies to the United States and to the global south? The historical course of Christianity in the United States has proved to be the most persistently vexing point of uncertainty and contention within one of the learned world’s most far-reaching debates, that surrounding the concept of secularization.¹ The discrediting of secularization theory has become a popular academic and journalistic sport, conveying to readers a speaker’s up-to-date aloofness from all those secular triumphalists who saw religion disappearing with the advancement of the modernization process.² The coming of a “postsecular” world is heralded amid confident dismissals of the old twentieth-century intelligentsia’s lingering Enlightenment conceits.³ Sociologists are uniquely prominent in debating what one of their number, Jose Casanova, calls the great “impasse” in the secularization debate—that classic secularization theory works well for Europe but not for the United States—but the debate attracts anthropologists, political scientists, philosophers, theologians, scholars of Religious Studies, and, less often, historians.⁴

I believe historians have more to offer in these debates than has been recognized. Specialists in the history of the United States, especially, are in a position to clarify and perhaps even to resolve some of the central issues. Moreover, this debate has an additional appeal to intellectual historians, a subgroup long engaged by the relationship between elite and popular thought. Christianity has been a discursive domain in which large segments of the intellectual elite of the United States and large segments of

the less-educated public have shared a set of questions⁵ and have engaged one another. Unlike the natural sciences, social sciences, philosophy, and some other fields, the history of Christianity is not primarily the history of educated elites. Christianity's American fate has unfolded across educational lines, while often being shaped by exactly those educational differentials.

By addressing the destiny of one religion in one country we can bracket the more general claims and counterclaims about what is genuinely "religious," respecting without endorsing the now popular assertion that the very religious-secular distinction is a peculiarity of the North Atlantic West, of little utility for studying Islam or Buddhism or other cultural projects long called "the world's great religions."⁶ But this bracketing does not remove historians altogether from the larger social theoretical discourse. Explanation and prediction do constitute a logical syndrome. Historians should not shrink in horror from the prospect that our findings about a discrete patch of history will be deployed by social scientists to improve the most general of their theories.⁷

According to secularization theory as developed in the 1960s on the basis of long neglected insights of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, a once widespread dependence upon supernatural authority and the institutions ostensibly authorized by that authority was gradually diminished in response to the major social transformations of modern, industrial times, especially (1) the movement of populations from the rural countryside to diverse urban environments, (2) the advancement of science and literacy, (3) the diminution of physical insecurity, and (4) the strengthening of democratic political institutions facilitating the social empowerment of larger populations. All of these things happened in the United States, but with consequences that invite clarification. I believe it is fair to insist that the kinds of religion classical secularization theory was most concerned to address have, indeed, declined. *I will argue that a valid understanding of American history vindicates the basic insights of classical secularization theory, invites that theory's use as an instrument for explaining Christianity's American fate as it has actually unfolded, and compels a reconsideration of the metrics and vocabulary of social science in regard to the study of Christianity.*

So, just how could Christianity flourish in the United States even while it was demonstrably experiencing the same transforming historical conditions the secularization theorists of the 1960s found central to Christianity's declining appeal to populations in Western Europe?

Several deeply structural demographic and constitutional peculiarities mitigated the effect in America of the relevant mechanisms. The society began and long remained demographically dominated by Protestant "dissenters" who defined themselves against a variety of European establishments, Anglican and Lutheran as well as Roman Catholic. These dissenting Protestants easily achieved strong class position in the political and social vacuum of a settler society, coming into a measure of control over public life that endured well into the twentieth century.⁸ The United States was largely theirs for the taking, and they took it. These Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists,

Quakers, Huguenots, and a multitude of Anabaptist-Pietist confessions flourished under a constitutional regime of church-state separation that facilitated the growth of religiously defined voluntary societies. The disestablishment of churches in one state after another—Massachusetts, in 1833, was the last, renouncing in that year the use of taxes to support the Congregationalists—can be counted as a type of secularization, to be sure, comparable to the federal Constitution's First Amendment and to that Constitution's omission of any reference to God, anomalous in the governance cultures of the Christian West at that time. But this institutional autonomy of religiously defined affiliations liberated them to perform the classically Tocquevillian role of voluntary associations in civil society much more readily than churches could perform that role in countries where religion remained part of the state. Church-state separation may not promote this result in all possible circumstances, but in the absence of other institutions and amid a population uniquely saturated with the more-religious-than-thou sensibility of dissent, the American denominational order became firmly established. The nineteenth century became the epoch of massive church expansion, not only for the traditional European-origin groups, but also for newer indigenous fellowships, above all, the Disciples of Christ and the Mormons. To this denominational order the non-dissenting Episcopalians and a variety of Lutheran bodies adjusted quite easily. Immigrants from Catholic counties also turned to their own churches as vital solidarities, mediating between the kinship group and the larger society run by Protestants who were usually hostile to Catholicism.

Large-scale immigration by Protestants as well as Catholics, moreover, provided a constant supply of people in need of intermediate solidarities. The social-psychological condition of an immigrant-receiving society, where a demand for intimacy and belonging is especially intense, is thus a crucial source of Christianity's success in America. Populations born with a proprietary relation to a land and its national institutions feel this need less acutely. The ironically church-promoting consequences of "secularizing" church-state separation were all the more pronounced, and helped distinguish the United States from immigrant-receiving countries lacking this separation. Even Protestant émigrés from Northern Europe, in the great migration that ended in the 1920s, faced social circumstances very different from those of their kin who continued to live in more homogenous, less mobile societies, such as Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, England, and Scotland. The denominational order of the United States was thus heavily ethnic in character, reflecting the immigrant origins of the predominantly Scottish and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, the Dutch Reformed as separate from the German Reformed, the various Lutheran synods defined by several Scandinavian and German antecedents, the persistently English stock of the Congregationalists, Quakers, and Episcopalians, and the *de facto* divisions of Catholic parishes along Polish, Italian, Irish, and other ethnic lines. No doubt many Americans, like many Europeans, had non-Durkheimian reasons for religious affiliation—fear of death and illness? aesthetic appreciation for the mass? the apparent cogency of the faith itself?—but this

solidarity-providing function goes a long way toward explaining the differential popularity of churches in the United States and the countries of Western Europe under the same basic conditions of industrialization.

These peculiarities of American history affected not only the populace, but also the most highly educated of inhabitants. In America, the Enlightenment itself, as Henry May demonstrated in a landmark book of 1976, took a relatively church-friendly form. Ideas aggressively skeptical of Christianity were on the defensive in a nation of extensive investment in Christian communities. Throughout the nineteenth century, American thinkers experienced deeper and more abiding concerns about evolutionary science and about historicist Biblical scholarship than did their European counterparts. Generally, these scientists, scholars, and writers came to accept the Darwinian revolution in natural history and the Higher Criticism's embedding of the Bible in the dynamics of human history, but these enlightened intellectuals dealt gingerly with an American public whose religiously based resistance threatened to block the advancement of inquiry and the dissemination of its results. Moreover, the highly democratic distribution of juridical authority within most Protestant denominations—especially the major dissenting groups—endowed the people in the pew with enormous power, with the result that preachers and professors at church-related colleges and seminaries could not get too far out in front of their constituencies without endangering their standing as leaders and their livings as salaried employees.⁹

The development of the modern university as a nonsectarian institution in the last third of the nineteenth century provided crucial institutional space for American careers running on the same discursive tracks traveled by scholars and scientists in England, Germany, and France. But even in that peculiarly Europe-like space, a generic Protestantism, well represented by Cornell University president Andrew Dickson White—an Episcopalian whose iconic *Warfare of Science with Theology* took place explicitly within “Christendom”—continued to infuse the public culture of these campuses well into the twentieth century. Even through World War II the massive reluctance of most of the nation's ostensibly secular universities to hire Jewish professors in the culturally strategic fields of social science and humanities attested to how firmly in place were the traditional brakes on dechristianization. Scientific knowledge did its demystifying work in the minds of those Americans most touched by it, but the bulk of Americans were able to ignore it. The popular antagonism toward Darwinism developed only in the early 1920s when the expansion of high school education brought millions of American families who had been largely oblivious to evolutionary science into direct contact with it for the very first time.

These facts about American history seem obvious enough, once stated. They do enable us to see how the United States could be subject to the same social transformations experienced elsewhere while its population retained a greater attraction to Christianity. Yet even the most recent writings by some of the most resolute defenders of secularization theory, like Steve Bruce, fail to effectively mobilize these facts about American

history.¹⁰ Historians might have been of greater help to secularization theorists of the 1960s and after, but our attention was elsewhere. My own tribe of intellectual historians focused for the most part on elites and studied the gradual diminution of the authority of Christianity from Puritan times to the middle of the twentieth century, a bona fide reality well worth studying, while social and political historians were largely oblivious to the persistence of religion into the twentieth century, especially after the Scopes Trial of 1925, and were often tempted to treat religion as epiphenomenal in any case. The study of the religious doings of the populace in twentieth century America was a thing apart, heavily apologetic in character, and practiced in seminaries and church-related institutions and journals with little impact on the history profession. Eventually, however, Jon Butler's 1990 monograph, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, convinced historians generally that the United States was a much more Christianity-affirming, church-going country at the start of the twentieth century than it had been at the end of the 18th.¹¹ Even historians slow to absorb this pivotal social history breakthrough were struck by the prodigious influence of evangelical Protestantism in American politics from the 1980s onward, leading to the much greater attention to modern American religious history characteristic of the profession in very recent years.

But there is much more to Christianity's American fate than the retarding effect of demographic and constitutional circumstances on the growth of atheism and indifference. The same set of conditions has promoted certain, specific kinds of Christianity and has diminished others. More and more of the nation's professing Christians, especially in the last several decades, have espoused liberalized versions of the faith that downplay supernaturalism, doubt Biblical inerrancy, display tolerance and even respect for other religions, and look to non-religious authorities for guidance on how to live much of their lives. These liberal, ecumenical, and sometimes casual styles of Christianity were flagged as manifestations of "internal secularization" by sociologist Thomas Luckmann as early as 1967 and addressed more extensively and perspicaciously in 1993 by another sociologist, Mark Chaves, but the significance of Christianity of these types is routinely overlooked amid the flurry of attention won by politically and culturally aggressive evangelical Protestants.¹²

Scholars who cite the American case as a sign that secularization is simply not happening are especially prone to count everyone who professes the faith, failing to recognize vital distinctions. Some of the most prominently proclaimed and defended versions of Christianity display only a superficial resemblance to the varieties of "enchantment" that generated the inquiry of Weber and the other secularization theorists to begin with. Three of the most widely discussed American religious intellectuals of the twentieth century can illustrate this highly salient theme in the history of American Christianity.

William James is one of, if not the most important American theorist of Protestantism's relation to modernity. One textbook on the history of American religious thought as a whole divides the entire saga from colonial times onward into pre-James and post-James periods.¹³ James gained vast popular appeal as the philosopher who saved religion

from apparent threats to it emanating from science. Indeed, his *Varieties of Religions Experience* remains after more than a century one of the most respected scholarly studies of religion ever written in the English language. Yet neither in this great book, nor in his even more widely heralded essay, "The Will to Believe," does James defend a single Christian doctrine. James's sense of the religious was general in the extreme, but its persistent abstractness was obscured for many readers by the concreteness of his specific examples of religious experience and by the polemical edge of his attacks on secular zealotry. Theologians and religious studies scholars sometimes cling to James like a life-preserver, the great thinker who saw through secular conceits that remain an annoyance even today. The literature on secularization, however, almost never mentions James. Yet what he did was to make religion safe for science-educated Christians by removing from it anything more specific than a virtually undefined theism and enabling them to project their own particular faith on to James's defense of religion in general. The patterns of thought even among James's followers among theologians show that the Protestantism defended in James's name was at the outer edge of religious liberalism, sometimes proclaimed, as Gary Dorrien's exhaustive scholarship has established, with no supernaturalism whatsoever.¹⁴

Reinhold Niebuhr was among James's admirers, but in the introduction to his own edition of James's *Varieties* Niebuhr cautioned that James had entirely ignored the institutional aspect of religious experience.¹⁵ Niebuhr was understandably worried about the radical separation of individual mystical experiences from the churches designed to enable such experiences and to support their meaning in worldly life. What kinds of religion could possibly survive without institutionalization? Yet Niebuhr's own career also served to enable styles of Christianity easily merged with secular world-views. Niebuhr gutted traditional Christian ethics by denying that even the Sermon on the Mount could help one decide how to act in the world, and he vociferously condemned such claims when advanced against the violence carried out by working class revolutionaries and by the armies of the United States. If James made science safe for American Christians, Niebuhr made war safe for them, refuting pacifism's claims to a compelling New Testament warrant. Moreover, Niebuhr focused his efforts in the 1940s and 1950s on articulating a "Christian view of human nature" that was easily congruent with contemporary secular meditations on paradox, irony, and tragedy, such as those voiced in the fiction of Robert Penn Warren and James Gould Cozzens. Niebuhr railed against secularism and led an alliance of Catholics and religious Jews against it, but he was caught up in its own dynamics. Even his more conservative brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, chided him for justifying Christianity in terms of its functions in advancing American democracy. Reinhold Niebuhr defined his career as anti-secularist, but among his major historic functions was to advance a version of Christianity easily abandoned by those in his milieu who shared his social values and political agendas.¹⁶

That Christians could get along without any God talk at all, and should focus instead on the worldly mission of "liberating the captives" became explicit in the 1960s in the

writings of another popular theologian, Harvey Cox. In *The Secular City*, the now legendary treatise of 1965, Cox celebrated “secularization”—and called it by that name—as a liberation from “all supernatural myths and sacred symbols.” Like the Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson and other figures associated with the “death of God” theologies of the period, Cox spoke for, and to, Protestantism’s educated elite. Although Cox continued to espouse his own versions of Christianity—and does so to this day as the emeritus occupant of the oldest academic chair in the United States, the Hollis Professorship of Divinity at Harvard—his major influence appears to have been rendering many sons and daughters of Protestantism more comfortable with finding their way in life without religious affiliations.¹⁷

And comfortable in secularism they proved to be, in unprecedented numbers. From the late 1960s onward, young people born into the so-called mainline churches—especially the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Northern Baptists, Disciples of Christ, some of the Lutheran bodies, and the United Church of Christ—departed in droves and in most cases did not join other churches.¹⁸ But this outward migration, while a vital episode in Christianity’s American fate, is only one of a number of developments of the last half century that need to be confronted together. Recent social scientific studies illuminate these developments and helpfully supplement the findings of historians.

More specifically, what do these studies tell us about the course of American Christianity since the 1960s?

One thing they tell us with the most frequent and powerful warrants is that the percentage of Americans declaring that they have no religious affiliation at all has increased sharply. Between one-fifth and one-fourth of the national population now report this to pollsters. These are the “nones,” as survey researchers call them, because “none” is the answer given to a question about religious affiliation. Not all of the unaffiliated declare themselves to be without religious belief, to be sure, and atheism itself remains highly stigmatized whenever actually named. But demographers have been struck by the rapid growth of the number of proclaimed “nones.” As late as 1990, only 8 percent of Americans so classified themselves. This percentage had increased to 15 percent in 2000, and reached 20 percent in 2012, and then 23 percent in 2015.¹⁹ Although these non-churched Americans were socially distributed across all classes and demographic groups, differentials by ideology were huge: 40 percent of political liberals were religiously unaffiliated, while only 9 percent of political conservatives were.²⁰

About 40 percent of Americans still claim to attend church every week, helping to keep alive the image of American religiosity, but only about 25 percent actually do it. Many people are uncomfortable admitting how rarely they attend church. This discomfort renders all the more noteworthy the increase in the numbers of people who are willing to tell survey researchers that they never attend church; this percentage was 13 percent in 1990, but had reached 22 percent by 2008. Demographers Michael Hout and Claude Fischer report that “the key trend in attendance over the last half century or more has

been the decline in Catholic attendance to the level of that of mainline Protestants.” The people who demonstrably do attend church the most regularly are those evangelical Protestants who have the most conservative political and theological views, even within evangelical Protestantism. Church attendance, once widespread among Americans of a variety of religious orientations, is increasingly a behavior found in a narrow and politically conspicuous segment of the Christianity-affirming population of the country.²¹

Studies of belief are more difficult to design and execute than are studies of affiliation or attendance. Yet there has been a steady and clear decline of belief in the Bible’s “inerrancy.” In the mid-1970s about 40 percent of respondents affirmed that “the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” while by the early years of the twenty-first century, only 30 percent did. Educational level proved to be a decisive predictor: college graduates of any institution rarely affirmed biblical inerrancy, which remained the most appealing to Americans with the least education.²²

One trend in belief is supported by an abundance of survey research: most religiously affirming Americans no longer believe that their own faith is the only path to salvation. This was a major finding of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, the massive book of 2010 by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell that established how at ease the bulk of American Protestants and Catholics are with the religious diversity of their country. Most religiously affirming Americans are anything but sectarian and exclusive, Putnam and Campbell concluded. “Americans are increasingly concentrated at two opposite ends of the religious spectrum—the highly religious at one pole, and the avowedly secular at the other.” The most intensely religious are overwhelming white evangelical Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, African American Protestants, and Mormons. The rest of the spectrum, short of the opposite secular extreme is inhabited by people whom Putnam and Campbell describe as “moderately religious.” The members of this majority are highly tolerant of people with other faiths, and even switch affiliations quite often, not only from one denomination to another, but even from one religion to another. That formidable middle, roughly 60 percent of the American population, does include some who describe themselves as evangelicals, but located there among the religious “moderates” are virtually all of the nation’s ecumenical Protestants, nearly all of the non-Hispanic Catholics, and the overwhelming majority of religiously identifying Jews. These millions affirm their faith but ascribe to it more limited authority over their lives than is ascribed to religion by the religiously intense. The individuals and groups *American Grace* characterizes as the most religious are, by contrast, those who are the most socially enclosed, interacting more exclusively with birds of their theological feather, and devoted to home schooling and other devices for keeping modernity at a distance.²³

Putnam and Campbell’s widely discussed analysis is consistent with earlier, less publicized but highly valuable studies by Nancy T. Ammerman and Mark Chaves. Ammerman found that vast swaths of professing Christians were slow to affirm doctrines of any kind but were very serious about treating people according to the Golden

Rule. These “Golden Rule Christians” practiced decency in the name of Christ, and were quite tolerant of those who were tolerant in return. Chaves declares that it is a serious mistake to suppose that liberal ideas are in decline within the ranks of Christian believers, although this impression is often left by the press. The growth of theologically conservative—“Jesus Saves” but no one else does—evangelical Protestantism has been real, Chaves agrees, but he, like Putnam and Campbell, places it in a national context and finds that even a substantial portion of self-identified “born again Christians,” when asked to speak about their actual beliefs, answer key questions in the same way that the ecumenical “mainline” Methodists and Presbyterians do: endorsing “theological liberalism’s core beliefs,” outspokenly “appreciating other religions,” revising “traditional belief and practice” to take account of “modern circumstances,” and “rejecting Biblical literalism.” There does exist a substantial population of evangelical Protestants who affirm traditional beliefs, attend church every Sunday, and exercise great influence over American politics, but Chaves warns that if we focus only on that group, we will misunderstand the historic direction of American Christianity. Chaves insists, in italics, that “*no indicator of traditional belief or practice is going up*,” and he adds that “even in the midst of substantial continuity in American religion there are signs of change in the direction of less religion.”²⁴ In a yet more recent interpretation of the entirety of survey research on American religion over the course the last fifty years, Chaves and his collaborator, David Voas, conclude boldly that the gradual diminution of the authority of Christianity in the United States is now so pronounced as to largely eliminate the apparent gap between the American and Western European cases cases.²⁵

Helpful as these studies are in establishing the decline of traditional Christian practices and beliefs since the 1960s, survey researchers rarely ask exactly what kinds of education have been experienced by the individuals being surveyed. What sorts of knowledge do they actually possess? Putnam and Campbell casually deny that educational level varies significantly by religious orientations,²⁶ but they fail to make distinctions that would substantially diminish the truth value in this statement. The existing surveys usually inquire simply if a respondent was a college graduate or not, or if he or she had attended college for at least a while. Lost from view are differences in educational experience between graduates of Wheaton, Biola, Liberty, or Oral Roberts, on the one hand, and, on the other, graduates of Chicago, Harvard, Swarthmore, or Oberlin. Someone whose studies concentrated on chemical engineering or nursing or theology, moreover, might differ in religious perspective from someone who majored in biology, history, English, or sociology. A question that could elicit the same answer from Harvey Cox (a University of Pennsylvania graduate) and from James Dobson (Point Loma Nazarene University) does not tell us much. Did you graduate from college? Do you attend church every week? Do you believe in God? Yes, yes, yes, each could answer confidently. No wonder so many social scientists think that education has little impact on religion.

The few studies that do distinguish between types of colleges find that if higher education includes ample exposure to types of science and scholarship that bring critical

scrutiny to traditional religious beliefs, students drift toward liberal theological views. In the most methodologically rigorous and compelling of these studies, Samuel H. Reimer found that American Christians whose college education had included exposure to such liberal arts classics as Descartes, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche were much more likely to adopt liberal theological views than those who had not.²⁷ Students who attend religiously affiliated colleges experience less change than those who study at nonreligious institutions, although they, too, come out more skeptical about supernaturalism.²⁸

Taken together, these social scientific studies suggest the following generalization: *The more one knows about the world, the less inclined one is to ascribe to supernatural authority whatever value one finds in the teachings and social function of Protestant and Catholic churches, and the less inclined one is to invoke supernatural authority as a warrant for whatever specific worldly conduct one advocates.* I phrase the proposition this way—a variation on a central claim of the classical secularization theorists—in order to take into account the relatively worldly, disenchanting understanding of churches and ethical principles displayed by so many of the professing Protestants and Catholics surveyed by the researchers I have been citing. The fate of American Christianity is not only a story of the eventual and gradual migration of a substantial minority into either indifference or principled rejection; it is also a story of increasing historicization on the part of many of the remaining faithful, who come to accept churches for their social and psychological value. Christianity's American fate is also a story, to be sure, of adamant defense of supernatural authority for certain rules of conduct on the part of a segment of the population most protected from, or resistant to the knowledge proclaimed by contemporary natural scientists, historians, and social scientists. Such knowledge is not the only force in play, but it is a highly important one.

Comparative studies of evangelical and ecumenical congregations in single geographic regions confirm the sense that types of education make a difference, and in ways that fit the generalization offered earlier. In a study of churches in the Pacific Northwest, James K. Wellman Jr., found that virtually all evangelical leaders had been educated largely at Bible colleges and that even the most learned of the evangelical clergy had gone to conservative seminaries, where they had received little "Enlightenment training" and were at one with their parishioners in believing that a good life consisted in applying "the plain language of scripture" to everyday life. The Bible means what it says and it says what it means, and so on. The parishioners in both types of congregations in this study were more highly educated than the national average, but 41 percent of the ecumenical churchgoers had completed a postgraduate degree, while only 16 percent of the evangelicals had. This study is one of many showing that evangelicals have established a set of parallel educational institutions as well as philanthropic and entertainment institutions that effectively diminish the contact the faithful have not only with secularists but also with liberal Christians.²⁹

Additional studies, while not distinguishing between kinds of colleges, do provide valuable information about educational differences and their relation to the

contingencies of Christian commitment. The American Religious Identification Survey led by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Kaysar found, in 2001, that 72 percent of Unitarians, at the theologically liberal extreme, had college degrees, followed by Episcopalians at 56 percent and Presbyterians at 51 percent, while, at the opposite, far-evangelical extreme, Seventh Day Adventists had 29 percent, Assemblies of God 24 percent, Baptists 22 percent, Pentecostals 16 percent, Churches of God 15 percent, and Jehovah's Witnesses 12 percent.³⁰ To be sure, these figures reflect class positions, but religious orientation, education, and class position are often connected. Putnam and Campbell found that Americans with annual household incomes of more than \$100,000 scored the lowest of any income group in religious intensity, while those with household incomes of less than \$30,000 scored the highest. Putnam and Campbell also found that three-quarters of the population they count as the most religious "reject evolution altogether, and believe instead that God created human beings fewer than ten thousand years ago."³¹

A number of studies confirm the widespread understanding that that actual practice of scientific and scholarly inquiry promotes a secular orientation, or at least is a comfortable calling for men and women who are secular to begin with. For example, in the most credible study to date of the American professoriate, Cyrus Schleifer of Duke University found that the 346 academics included in the General Social Survey display decisively more secular beliefs and practices than other occupational groups.³² Advanced education in certain fields rather than others is more likely to promote a secular outlook. A widely disseminated study of 2010 by sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund found that while 63 percent of Americans declare that they "have no doubts about God's existence," only 9 percent of scientists will say that. A survey of academics in 1989 found that professors in the more narrowly technical, applied fields were considerably more likely to report religious belief than professors in the disciplines given to more theoretical knowledge. In response to the question, "what is your religion?" those saying "none" were the least common in dentistry (16 percent), library science (13 percent), nursing (12 percent), civil engineering (11 percent), and social work (9 percent), while the highest percentages for those willing to say they had no religion were in anthropology (65 percent), philosophy (55 percent), and zoology (53 percent). A 1998 survey of elite scientists, those elected to the National Academy of Sciences, found that 65 percent of the responding biologists and 79 percent of the physical scientists professed outright atheism—very unusual in this country, where atheism can now be called the orientation that dare not speak its name—and the bulk of the others preferred to call themselves agnostics. Only 5.5 percent of the responding biologists elected to the National Academy were willing to profess belief in a personal God. These recent findings are consistent with earlier studies, most notably, the widely disseminated surveys of James Leuba in the early decades of the twentieth century, who found leading scientists to be the most freethinking of all major occupational groups. Leuba determined that in 1914, 27.7 percent of National Academy scientists professed belief in a personal god, and that in 1933 only 15 percent did. A later study, modeled on Leuba's, found 7.9 percent in 1998.³³ These studies fall

well short of the highest standards of survey research, but their numbers are sufficiently extreme to warrant attention in a society in which more than 90 percent of the public, even in recent years, assures survey researchers that they are theists.

But quantitative social science is not the only source of support for the proposition I stated earlier about the effects of knowledge on the cultural project of Christianity. Historical studies of many kinds are pertinent. Differences in knowledge are known to have distinguished modernists from fundamentalists, and more recently, to have marked off the liberal, ecumenical Protestant groups from evangelicals. Our extensive literature on the reception of Darwinian science and of the Higher Criticism is unambiguous about the liberalizing effect of knowledge.³⁴ The churches were deeply affected by their foreign missionary project, which brought into their midst increasingly sympathetic accounts of ostensibly heathen peoples who, returning missionaries and their children insisted, were living refutations of the parochialism of the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Lutherans, and so on, of the sending society. Actual knowledge of the Chinese, the Indians, the Japanese, and other foreign peoples had a dramatically liberalizing effect on those who absorbed this knowledge, resulting in conflicts within the churches that were often more severe than those over evolution. By the mid-1930s, these quarrels over foreign peoples had driven Pearl Buck out of the Presbyterian Church, and had generated ecumenical initiatives that condemned as ethnocentric and anachronistic some of the most treasured doctrines of the churchgoing public.³⁵ Elesha Coffman's recent study of the history of the magazine *Christian Century* leaves no doubt that the further the liberal Protestant leadership traveled in the direction of modern secular learning, the greater the gap between them and the less educated but more orthodox Protestants, who gathered around the more conservative *Christianity Today* after it was founded by Billy Graham and the right-wing oil magnate Howard Pew in 1956.³⁶ Robert Wuthnow's 1988 classic, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*, argued that "[s]cientific and social scientific meaning systems appear to operate as functional alternatives to traditional theistic ideas," with the result that social scientists are among the least supernaturalist of all American occupational groups.³⁷

In the meantime, the American intelligentsia's knowledge of cultural diversity was powerfully advanced in the middle decades of the twentieth century by contact with Jewish professors and their nonacademic counterparts in literature, the arts, journalism, entertainment, and political movements. The coming of the Jewish intellectuals was important to begin with simply because these non-Christians brought American intellectuals of Protestant background into intimate, sustained, institutionalized contact with people who demonstrated on a daily basis that life's deepest challenges could be plausibly addressed outside the frame provided by Protestant Christianity even in its most liberalized forms. In that respect, the impact of the Jewish intellectuals on American academia and in the arts paralleled the impact of the foreign missionary project on the churches themselves. The expansion of social knowledge made a great difference in both of these two important cases. But an additional peculiarity of the Jewish

case was equally consequential: many of the Jewish intellectuals were avowedly secular in orientation, not affirmers of Judaism. They were more conspicuous than post-Protestant secularists, such as John Dewey, as carriers of the mainstream of European intellectual life that now leads theorists like Peter Berger to characterize the American intelligentsia as “Europeanized,” a somewhat loaded term that makes sense only in relation to the coming of Jewish intellectuals into prominence, and implies that there was something less than American about Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Dewey.³⁸

If the standard tools of secularization theory can illuminate the fate of Christianity in the United States, it does not follow that knowledge operated as an autonomous force, without the agency of individuals and groups who helped to make that knowledge and who believed society would be better off if instructed more by it than by traditional Christianity and its ecclesiastical leaders. Yes, the more one knows about the world, the less inclined one is to ascribe to supernatural authority whatever value one finds in the teachings and social function of Protestant and Catholic churches, at least in the United States, but knowing does not occur in a social and political vacuum. If there was not the “warfare of science and religion” that today’s popular writers are so eager to assure us never happened, there was most definitely a series of struggles between contesting parties over what standards of cognitive plausibility should apply.³⁹ As the sociologist Christian Smith emphasized in a recent retelling of the secularization saga of the American intellectual elite, “the liberal and modernist American Protestants” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “were not in calm waters throwing traditional orthodoxy overboard for the fun of it.” Rather, they were “trying to lighten the boat’s load to see if they could somehow keep it afloat” amid the gales blowing at them from the domains of a small but active and highly articulate minority of science-centered, avowedly secular intellectuals.⁴⁰

These conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the historically specific conditions that enabled them are largely ignored in Charles Taylor’s *The Secular Age*, which demands attention here as our era’s most widely discussed study of secularization. What most distinguishes this work is Taylor’s insistence on the unique importance of a conceptual shift he dates at approximately 1500, long before industrialization, urbanization, the Enlightenment, widespread literacy, modern natural science, and the spread of democratic political institutions. It was at that early modern moment, according to Taylor, that, for the first time in the Christian West, religious belief became an option rather than axiom of life, full stop. This new condition of optional belief defines the “secular age,” right down to the present. Taylor reviews briefly the intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but he sees little reason to dwell on that period because the crucial step in making our world secular long since taken.⁴¹ If Taylor is correct, the fate of Christianity in the United States is of relatively minor importance, working itself out within a frame established about three centuries before the federal Constitution ordained a political order in which religious faith was most definitely a matter of choice.

Historians found Taylor's book much more of a distraction than a source of insight. That ordinary inhabitants of Europe prior to 1500 were incapable of non-belief is far from established. As Jon Butler has pointed out, "Medieval Christians knew that faith was not axiomatic, if only because so many needed to be killed to make it so." Taylor "elides the Church's necessary resort to force and authority to sustain Christian belief in the centuries before 1500," Butler observes, and only occasionally does Taylor acknowledge "just how physically dangerous religious doubt, much less unbelief, could be" long before and long after that date. Opportunities for choice, of which Taylor makes so much, are indeed central to the recent history of the North Atlantic West, but those opportunities were greatly promoted by the industrial, urban, literary, and scientific events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to which Taylor scarcely attends. The cacophony of diverse religious voices even in 18th century British America, Butler shows did much to undermine any and all particular claims to a single religious truth.⁴²

Taylor's claims about history are indissolubly bound up with his pervasive philosophical, theological, and social-psychological affirmations of an enduring human need for a connection to something transcendent. Although modern intellectual life includes many voices insisting that this just ain't so,⁴³ Taylor blithely treats these voices as simply naïve. The many non-historian readers who have made Taylor's book the text of choice for discussions of secularization seem not to be bothered by this all-defining feature of *A Secular Age*. But Peter Gordon, Martin Jay, and Jonathan Sheehan as well as Butler have explained at length why historians look for evidence where Taylor, time after time, offers sage-like wisdom and personal confession and in an irenic spirit avoids honest engagement with alternatives to transcendence. Although saturated with bits and pieces of history and with sweeping claims about huge historical transformations, *A Secular Age* is written in such a voice as to render it, in my colleague Sheehan's words, "inoculated against historical critique."⁴⁴

Gordon complains that Taylor treats as the core of "modern selfhood" what is chiefly a "prejudicial" and arguably "inaccurate model" peculiar to "a certain class of philosophers." Taylor's critique of naturalism, Gordon continues, simply fails to deal with the historical reality of the existence of highly developed naturalist thinking that does not fall victim to the arrogance and parochialism Taylor ascribes to it. Gordon further complains that Taylor pays scant attention to "the muddled majority" in the United States who are not "strict theists or strict atheists." Many Americans are no longer "at ease in the full-dress garments" of firm, traditional Christian commitment but they are reluctant to cast them altogether aside; they participate simultaneously, Gordon says, in "believing and not believing," aware on some level "that the beliefs they do hold" are both historically and psychologically contingent. Voicing a perspective not unlike that of Ammerman, Putnam, and Campbell, Gordon allows that if we are going to talk about today's modes of believing, one might regard as "the most typical religious sentiments among twenty-first century moderns" as not those who believe or don't believe—exercising Taylor's great choice—but those who live "with a sense of muddle."⁴⁵

Attention to that muddle, and to all the goings on between orthodoxy and irreligion might enable the secularization debates to depart more decisively from the either/or, belief/non-belief, religion/secular set of dichotomies that dog secularization theory. Let them concentrate, instead, on spectra and the dynamics of change even when that change falls short of manifest indifference or avowed secularism. The tools of secularization theory are underutilized when applied only to a finished product called the secular.

Yet when we do look at liberalization and secularization as two parts of the same large historical process, as I am here encouraging us to do, we encounter a challenge we have been able to avoid while using the stark religion-secular, Christian-post-Christian dichotomies. The challenge is to formulate scholarly arguments that are not entangled with the portentous antagonisms, internal to faith communities, over authenticity. If we conclude that the American fate of Christianity is keyed by a dynamic of “internal secularization” in which the most otherworldly forms of the old faith are gradually and episodically abandoned by the majority of professing Christians we risk conflating the scholars’ voice with the polemics of religious conservatives who regularly castigate liberals as having sold out the faith for secular modernity. Without that polemical intent, earlier in this chapter I presented William James, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Harvey Cox as “secularizers” of certain kinds, a usage that entails the same risk.

If the people who consciously reject Christianity or simply become indifferent to it are the “real” secularists, what vocabulary should we use for those who profess Christianity but on terms that, had they been the defining terms all along, might not have generated so many inquiries into the dimensions of Christianity’s ordinance and decline? If Christianity in 1500 or 1700 or 1900 was what many Methodists and Episcopalians affirm today, one wonders if there would have been such a fuss about deciding its boundaries and appeal. It was the otherworldliness, after all—in particular the ascribing to supernatural powers of the authority for behaving in the world in certain ways and not others—of Christianity in its various forms that made it worth identifying and measuring. I wonder if we would have secularization theory at all if the operative model for the Christian had been what we find, for example, in the case of the prominent Catholic writer of our own time, James Carroll.

Carroll wrote *Practicing Catholic* in 2009 partly to answer charges that his extreme liberalism on a large expanse of doctrinal and political issues rendered him not really a Catholic at all, but a secularist pretending to be a Catholic. To this the former priest responded with testimony that he could become a true Catholic only by leaving a priesthood still affected by pre-Vatican II ideas and practices. Carroll offered a ringing vindication of the reforms of Vatican II and a fierce declaration of Catholic loyalty couched in terms of historicist understandings of his church and pluralistic conceptions of the American social and political order. Ultimately, Carroll justifies the Catholic Church not because supernatural power ordains it, but “because we cannot live without it.” It is not, then, a matter of obedience to God, but rather a matter of assessing human capabilities in a historical context, and achieving a satisfactory spiritual orientation given

one's circumstances. Speaking for liberal Catholics like himself, Carroll appreciates the church because it "gives us a language with which to speak of God, a Meaning that is God," and "keeps the story of Jesus alive." Rejecting with a vengeance the tradition of Catholic sectarianism, especially its refusal to recognize Protestants as part of the true church, Carroll affirms "our communion with all the baptized."⁴⁶

It is surely awkward for us scholars to say of Carroll and his many ecumenical Protestant counterparts that they are not "really" Christian. Do we take sides with them in the arguments within the Christian community of faith, and declare that they, the liberals, are more authentic Christians than their conservative critics? That is an intriguing idea: the secularization debates would look different if they were informed by the conviction that liberalized Protestantism and Catholicism were the real Christianity, and the so-called orthodoxy of the conservatives was simply a set of anachronisms left over from times and places in which Christianity took on the contours of cultures then enjoying hegemony. Disenchantment, in this view, is the road to the true faith. The story of secularization then becomes a story of Christianization. Aquinas and Calvin as proto-Christians. Harvey Cox as the real thing? Jonathan Edwards as a tortured and confused prolegomenon to Marilynne Robinson?

Can we scholars avoid the trap of participating, no matter what our intentions, in the internal disputes of communities of faith? It is not the business of the scholar to protect liberal Christians from the attacks of their more conservative rivals. We must tell history as we find it, but getting the right vocabulary for this can be a challenge. I believe we can say at least, in the non-teleological mode of historians, that the liberals often serve as stepping stones toward the post-Christian, but that a number of these liberals will not be taking additional steps in a post-Christian direction because they prefer to stay where they are. A historicist approach to the study of Christianity and its American fate can interpret people like Carroll, Cox, Niebuhr, and James as artifacts of honest struggles to employ the resources of the Christian tradition while accommodating the most warranted historical, social, and natural scientific knowledge of their own epochs.

If we find that the 20 percent of Americans that Putnam and Campbell call intensely religious are the only parts of the United States today that practice the kind of Christianity that secularization theory was designed to measure, the United States does indeed join the secularized nations of the industrialized North Atlantic West. In this perspective, the most unreconstructed of the secularization theorists like Steve Bruce are more right than they ever dreamed.

This conclusion about the American case would be in keeping with classical secularization theory's tendency to draw a sharp line between Christianity and the lack of it, between the religious and the secular. But this conclusion would drag that portentous line raspily across the backs of millions of professing Christians in order to mark out the kind of Christianity secularization theory has been the most designed to address. Doing that does risk our coming across as accusing liberal Catholics and ecumenical Protestants of having a watered-down version of their faith, of having less claim to its

symbolic capital than do their orthodox rivals. Who, indeed, owns that symbolic capital? Who decides? What role do the public pronouncements of scholars and the vocabulary we use play in the worldly struggles over that ownership?

One way to diminish this invidious consequence of our inherited vocabulary—much of which we may be stuck with—is to formulate our social theoretical hypotheses and our historical interpretations in terms that particularize our inquiries and avoid the most loaded of labels. Hence my attraction to refinements that speak of Christianity as a cultural program rather than as a “religion,” and that specify just what is being analyzed and even measured. This disposition drives the social-theoretical generalization I introduced earlier: *The more one knows about the world, the less inclined one is to ascribe to supernatural authority whatever value one finds in the teachings and social function of Protestant and Catholic churches, and the less inclined one is to invoke supernatural authority as a warrant for whatever specific worldly conduct one advocates.* The concept of the secular thus drops out altogether, but the core of what secularization theory has apparently been trying to measure emerges more prominently.

The point of this knowledge-centered proposition is not that the advancement of knowledge explains everything, but only that it is a highly confirmed force for the diminution of the supernaturalism that has long been central to Christianity in the North Atlantic West. Like all generalizations of that scope, there are many exceptions to it. Some of the most learned men and women in the world affirm supernatural authority in that manner. But history and social science, while recognizing particular cases, and properly given pause by them, cannot be held in thrall by them. A few cold winters does not mean that the Greenland icecap is not melting. Overall, the history of the United States supports this social-theoretical proposition, and this proposition goes a long way toward explaining what has happened to Christian project in the United States.

Might this proposition have some use for explaining developments beyond the United States? I will not push the point, but a number of studies suggest that our understanding of Western European and Canadian “secularization” would be sharpened if we were to apply this proposition in those locales, too.⁴⁷ I will not speculate about the global south beyond reminding us that science, literacy, and democracy are often even harder to find there than in the United States, and that the use of supernatural warrants for worldly conduct is common in the global south. Americo-centric as my own analysis is, I found bracing Perry Anderson’s adamant assertion in a recent issue of the *London Review of Books*: “[S]ecularization continues unabated across the advanced world.”⁴⁸ Could he be right? He appears to believe, as I do, that the type of religion at issue is that which offers supernatural warrant for actions in the world.

Returning, then, to history, from this little exercise in social theory, I hope it is fair to insist that the fate of Christianity in the United States is indeed one of the gradual and episodic diminution of supernaturalism in the light of, first, Enlightenment-inspired standards of cognitive plausibility and, second, knowledge of the social diversity of the human species. Cognitive demystification and demographic diversification have

proceeded in tandem. In many circles, the American fate of Christianity includes the development and perpetuation of liberalized varieties of Christianity as well as varieties of indifference and unbelief. Thus the substantive vindication of secularization theory depends ultimately on the abandonment of some of its own vocabulary. The late Ronald Dworkin continued to use the word “religion” to describe an outlook that eschews the supernatural while affirming a sensibility common to many self-described secularists. Adherents of this “religion without God” feel

an inescapable responsibility to live their lives well, with due respect for others; they take pride in a life they think well lived and suffer sometimes inconsolable regret at a life they think, in retrospect, wasted. They find the Grand Canyon not just arresting but breathtakingly and eerily beautiful. They are not simply interested in the latest discoveries about the vast universe but enthralled by them . . . They express a conviction that the force and wonder they sense are real, just as real as the planets or pain, that moral truth and natural wonder do not simply evoke awe but call for it.⁴⁹

Whether or not we accept Dworkin’s use of the term *religion* to describe this set of feelings about life—is Dworkin “really” secular, or is he really religious? Does it matter?—Dworkin’s clear rejection of supernaturalism and his refusal to embrace the particular cultural projects that have been advanced in the North Atlantic West under the sign of divinity render him an example of what the process of knowledge-centered secularization, as I have discussed it in this chapter, can produce. The same case has been made for John Rawls in a recent, powerful study by P. Mackenzie Bok.⁵⁰ The post-Protestant and more broadly post-Christian writings of our own time carry on a tradition that M. H. Abrams long ago identified in the writings of the early nineteenth-century intelligentsia:

Despite their displacement from a supernatural to a natural frame of reference, however, the ancient problems, terminology, and ways of thinking about human nature and history survived, as the implicit distinctions and categories through which even radically secular writers saw themselves and their world, and as the presuppositions and forms of their thinking about the condition, the milieu, the essential values and aspirations, and the history and destiny of the individual and of mankind.⁵¹

But what does it mean to “know”? Some might insist that what I am treating as knowledge is merely the content of a historically particular episteme. “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free,” proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth. But the truth Jesus wanted his listeners to *know* was the truth of his own ministry and the indispensability of discipleship to him. Many members of Jesus’s own ancestral tribe did not find

this at all persuasive, at least at the time he said it. Those present answered, according to the author of the Gospel of John, that as the seed of Abraham they had “never been in bondage to anyone.”⁵² Yet, as with so much of the Bible, these eloquent words attributed to Jesus have been taken up in other contexts. Nonreligious voices often quote these lines to defend untrammelled inquiry and scientific education, and to insist on the central role of both in building and maintaining a free society. Many of us have long since pulled these words of Jesus from their decidedly sectarian context, and conflated them with Kant’s *Sapere aude*: “Have the courage to use your own understanding,” or “Dare to know.”⁵³ In making this conflation do not we, like Kant himself, participate in the creating of a post-Christian culture, if not a secular one?

NOTES

1. For helpful suggestions on the basis of drafts of this chapter, I thank Nancy T. Ammerman, Jon Butler, Mark Chaves, Peter Gordon, Malachi Hacoen, Thomas Albert Howard, Bruce Kuklick, R. Laurence Moore, Jonathan Sheehan, Brent Sockness, David Voas, Molly Worthen, and especially James T. Kloppenberg. Earlier versions of it were presented in several venues, including as the Lovejoy Lecture for the 2014 Annual Conference of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, the keynote address for the 2013 Annual Meeting of the United States Intellectual History Society, and as part of the 2013 Danforth Lectures on Religion and Politics at Washington University, St. Louis.

2. Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global View,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. P. L. Berger (Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 3, is a typical case: Berger, who in the 1960s himself espoused secularization theory, had by the end of the 1990s declared this theory “essentially mistaken,” and so egregiously wrongheaded as to make what is really difficult to understand “not Iranian mullahs but American university professors.” One of the finest critiques of secularization theory is J. C. D. Clark, “Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a Grand Narrative,” *Historical Journal* 55 (March 2012): 161–94, which points to weaknesses in secularization theory that follow from trying to take the entire world into account and, within the North Atlantic West, working with very broad definitions of what counts as “religion.”

3. The notion of the “postsecular” has been popularized by Jurgen Habermas, et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010). The notion has been subjected to intensive and sometimes withering scrutiny in Philip S. Groski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Post-secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). For another lucid commentary on the difficulties of this concept, see Alan Megill, “History, Theoreticism, and the Limits of the ‘Postsecular,’” *History & Theory* 52 (2013): 110–29, esp. 120–29. For a trenchant critique of Habermas’s “religious turn,” see Peter Gordon, “Between Christian Democracy and Critical Theory: Habermas, Bockenforde, and the Dialectics of Secularization in Postwar Germany,” *Social Research* 80 (Spring 2013): 173–202.

4. Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” *Hedgehog Review* 8 (2006): 15.

5. For an exposition of the method of intellectual history that focuses on shared questions, see my contribution to the “Wingspread book,” named after a 1977 conference at the Wingspread Center in Racine, Wisconsin. David A. Hollinger, “Historians and the Discourse of Intellectuals,” in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 42–63.

6. This concern has been voiced frequently by Talal Asad, whose ideas are summarized and discussed in *The Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

7. That historians should think more systematically about the ways in which their work can inform social theory is convincingly argued by William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

8. The success of these Protestants in controlling the public life of the United States even in the face of the church-state separation has not always been recognized in an era when scholars are rightly concerned to identify the agency of Americans other than white Protestants. The story of Protestant cultural influence is well told by David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

9. Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). In the copious literature on ideas about science and religion in America, the many volumes written or edited by Ronald L. Numbers stand out for their range and depth. These include one of several that Numbers coedited with David C. Lindberg, *When Science and Christianity Meet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

10. See especially, Steve Bruce’s two most direct discussions of the American case: Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2002), 204–28, and *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157–76.

11. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). See also Jon Butler, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *Journal of American History* 90 (March 2004): 1357–78.

12. Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 36–37; Mark Chaves, “Intraorganizational Power and Internal Secularization in Protestant Denominations,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99 (1993): 1–48.

13. William Clebsch, *American Religious Thought: A History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973).

14. For a rigorous account of the ideas of James’s disciples among American liberal Protestant theologians, see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 216–85. I have addressed the specific character of James’s religiosity in several papers, including “William James, Ecumenical Protestantism, and the Dynamics of Secularization,” in *William James and Religion*, ed. Martin Halliwell (Oxford, 2014), 31–47.

15. Reinhold Niebuhr, introduction to William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Touchstone 1960).

16. For a fuller development of this interpretation of Niebuhr as an unintended agent of secularization, see “Epilogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and Protestant Liberalism,” in my *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 211–25. For the “Niebuhrian” theme in American fiction of the period,

see especially, Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946); and James Gould Cozzens, *Guard of Honor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

17. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 2, 268. Robinson's *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), was an instant sensation on account of its slashing attacks on supernaturalism made in the name a more enlightened Christianity.

18. I have discussed this development in *After Cloven Tongues*, esp. 18–19, 37–49.

19. Michael Lipka, "Religious 'Nones' Are Not Only Growing, They're Becoming More Secular," Pew Research Center: Fact Tank, November 11, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>.

20. Among the most helpful compendiums of the relevant surveys are Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-religious Americans* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), and Mark Chaves, *American Religion* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2011). Numerous studies show that persons responding to survey questions are much more comfortable expressing contempt for atheists than for ethno-racially defined groups long subject to systematic, sanctioned discrimination and abuse.

21. Michael Hout, Claude S. Fischer, and Mark A. Chaves, "More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Key Finding from the 2012 General Social Survey" (report, Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, University of California, Berkeley, March 2013), 1–9; Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference," *American Sociological Review* 77 (2002): 165–90.

22. Chaves, *American Religion*, 34–37.

23. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), esp. 3, 18–21. These authors employ a "religiosity index" based on a complex of questions designed to measure degrees of belief, belonging, and practice. I have commented on this book and its significance to the study of American religious history on The Immanent Frame website, <http://blogs.ssr.org/tif/2011/09/12/the-era-of-fosdicks-revenge/>.

24. Chaves, *American Religion*, 110. Nancy Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). See also Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 288. Many evangelical youth now "talk like classical liberal Protestants."

25. Mark Chaves and David Voas, "Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?" *American Journal of Sociology* 121 (2016), 1517–56). This is the most thorough and persuasive study now in existence of what survey research tells us about religion in the United States.

26. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, e.g., 27, 545.

27. Samuel H. Reimer, "Higher Education and Theological Liberalism: Revisiting the Old Issue," *Sociology of Religion* 71 (2010): 393–408.

28. Other recent, relevant studies include Jonathan P. Hill, "Faith and Understanding: Specifying the Impact of Higher Education on Religious Belief," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50 (2011): 533–51; and Philip Schwadel, "The Effects of Education on Americans' Religious Practices, Beliefs, and Affiliations," *Review of Religious Research* 53 (2011): 161–82. Schwadel emphasizes the ways in which college education supports religious

affiliation, but he does not distinguish sharply enough between the kinds of faith his data show his subjects to be affirming.

29. James K. Wellman Jr., *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 52–53, 210–11. For a representative account of “network closure,” by which evangelicals create a social and intellectual world apart from the secular mainstream, see Michael J. McFarland, Bradley R. E. Wright, and David L. Weakleim, “Educational Attainment and Religiosity,” *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2011): 166–88, esp. 169.

30. Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market*, 153–54. The same study revealed that SAT scores, which are said to inevitably reflect knowledge as well as the ability they are designed to measure, produce similar numbers: the superliberal Unitarians and Quakers are far ahead of any evangelical groups; high SAT scores are also reported by many other “mainline” denominations, including Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians.

31. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 21–22, 26.

32. Cyrus Schleifer, “The Religiosity of American Professors,” unpublished paper, Duke University, 2013. Schleifer also provides a discerning critical commentary on virtually all other social scientific studies of the religious beliefs and practices of American academics. See also John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen Mahoney, “Religion and Knowledge in the Post-secular Academy,” in Gorski et al., *Post-secular in Question*, 215–48.

33. Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16. For a helpful overview of the many studies of the religious ideas of scientists and scholars, see Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, “Atheists: A Psychological Profile,” in ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 300–17, esp. 309, 312. For Leuba’s classic studies, see J. H. Leuba, *Belief in God and Immortality: A Psychological, Anthropological, and Statistical Study* (Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1916), and J. H. Leuba, “Religious Beliefs of American Scientists,” *Harper’s* 169 (1934): 292–300.

34. Out of this literature by intellectual historians, one undervalued work deserves mention: John H. Roberts and James Turner have analyzed with special clarity the methodological naturalism and philological historicism that pulled late nineteenth-century American intellectuals further and further from the supernaturalist beliefs proclaimed by the churches to which the bulk of the public belonged. See Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. 117–21.

35. William Hutchison, *Errand to the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

36. Elisha Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

37. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 301–2,

38. See David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. 17–41, “Jewish Intellectuals and the Dechristianization of American Public Culture.” Peter Berger referred to American intellectuals as “Europeanized” in an interview conducted by Charles T. Mathewes for *Hedgehog Review* 8 (2006): 155.

39. I have offered an account of some of these struggles in *After Cloven Tongues*, 82–102. For a representative, recent effort to assure us that there never was a genuine conflict, see Peter Harrison, “That Religion Has Typically Impeded the Progress of Science,” in *Newton’s Apple*

and *Other Myths about Science*, ed. Ronald Numbers and Kostas Kampourakis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 195–201.

40. Christian Smith, “Introduction: Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life,” in *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, ed. Christian Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 48, 67. A curiosity of Smith’s generally accurate account is his bracketing of the appeal and power of scientific knowledge to begin with. He focuses effectively on how pro-science intellectuals contended with varieties of faith-affirming contemporaries, and he makes clear that traditional Protestantism had many features which few today would defend, yet he treats science more as a tool of anti-religious reformers than as an enterprise that won the loyalty of these reformers in the first place, and engendered their discomfort with the kinds of Christianity they saw as a barrier to its progress and socially beneficial effects. The treatment of a scientific intelligentsia as a force in itself rather than a phenomenon to be explained is a common deficiency in studies that are protective of Christianity. Another example is Jeffrey Cox, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularisation: A Progress Report,” in *Secularisation in the Christian World*, ed. Calum Brown and Michael Snape, (London: Routledge, 2011), 13–26. Cox suggests that once a critical mass of secularists has come into being and exercises social influence, it becomes, in itself, an agent of de-Christianization, but he pulls back from trying to explain why that critical mass was reached in the United States in the 1960s.

41. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

42. Jon Butler, “Disquieted History in a Secular Age,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 202, 205.

43. Some of these voices are helpfully collected in George Levine, ed., *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). See especially the essay by Philip Kitcher, “Challenges for Secularism,” in Levine, *Joy of Secularism*, 24–56; and Kitcher’s book, *Life after Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). See also Louise M. Antony, ed., *Philosophers without Gods: Mediations on Atheism and the Secular Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). The philosopher Gary Gutting conducted an illuminating series of interviews on these issues in “The Stone,” a feature of the *Opinionator* blog, *New York Times*, in 2014, the summarizing capstone of which appeared on October 13, 2014, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/gary-gutting/?_r=0.

44. Jonathan Sheehan, “When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age,” in Warner, *Varieties of Secularism*, 217–42, esp. 227. In a long, remarkably uncritical introduction to *Varieties of Secularism* the editors seem to me to join in this inoculation, implying that Taylor’s profundity is beyond the grasp of historians, and asserting cryptically (21) that Taylor’s book is more of a “genealogy” than a work of “professional historiography.”

45. Peter Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (October 2008): 655, 668. See also Martin Jay, “Faith-based History,” *History and Theory* 48 (2009): 76–84.

46. James Carroll, *Practicing Catholic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), esp. 321. Carroll’s many books include *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews, a History* (New York: Mariner, 2002).

47. Studies of secularization in the United Kingdom, while attending to a variety of social, economic, and cultural factors, seem to me also to support this general claim. See, esp. Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009); Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and S. J. D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c. 1920-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also many of the highly illuminating articles in Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, eds., *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

48. Perry Anderson, "One Exceptional Figure Stood Out," *London Review of Books*, July 30, 2015, 20–21. On these same pages Anderson offers a fine parody of the ways in which "religion" is saved from secularization claims by the spinning of one definition of religion after another. All those who believe secularization is real just don't understand what religion really is. An advantage of focusing on supernaturalist warrants for worldly conduct is that it neutralizes this bait-and-switch practice, and liberates other the cultural programs that have been classified as "religion" for study in other terms. See also the recent writings of Oliver Roy, for example, "The Disconnect between Religion and Culture," *IMWPOST*, Spring-Summer 2015, 17–18. Those who play tricks with definitions of religion often cite Clifford Geertz's classic essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," which offers a definition of religion so broad that it can be employed in an almost infinite variety of contexts. For a severe and convincing critique of this essay of Geertz's see Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner, "Clifford Geertz's Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions," *Journal of Religion* 79 (1999), 617–40. Geertz's essay has been reprinted in many places, but is most easily accessible in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books: New York, 1973), 87–125.

49. Ronald Dworkin, "Religion without God," *New York Review of Books*, April 4, 2013, 67.

50. P. Mackenzie Bok, "To the Mountaintop Again: The Early Rawls and Post-Protestant Ethics in Postwar America," in *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming 2016).

51. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 13. This work remains one of the most sensitive studies of the secularization process ever written.

52. John 8:32–33.

53. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment," accessed at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>.