

The Undergraduate Journal of Social Studies

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Revisiting the Secularization Thesis*

Article 1

12-3-2013

Rethinking the Relationship Between Religion and Modernity: The Emergence of the New Christian Right in America

Scott Elias

Wesleyan, selias@wesleyan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/ujss>

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elias, Scott (2013) "Rethinking the Relationship Between Religion and Modernity: The Emergence of the New Christian Right in America," *The Undergraduate Journal of Social Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/ujss/vol4/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Wesleyan Journals and Series at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Undergraduate Journal of Social Studies by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact dschnaidt@wesleyan.edu, ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Rethinking the Relationship Between Religion and Modernity: The Emergence of the New Christian Right in America

Scott Elias

With a blare of confidence, Rodney Stark dismisses the secularization theory as “useless as a hotel elevator that only goes down.”¹ As Stark puts it, “after nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper “*requiescat in pace*.”² Instead, like Philip Gorski, Stark believes that “what is needed is a body of theory to explain religious variation, to tell us when and why various aspects of religiousness rise and fall, or are stable.”³ Perhaps we simply need a more nuanced theory regarding secularization that adequately addresses legitimate criticism. Indeed, if we are to succeed in understanding the emergence of the New Christian Right in the 1980s and its consequences on the American political system—such as an alliance with neoliberal or market fundamentalist ideology—we must re-imagine the relationship between religion and modernity, rethink the intermeshing of public and private spheres, discard the false notion that “modernization” necessarily means “secular” in totality, and embrace an understanding of different kinds and levels of religiosity, in which religiosity can and does participate in the ongoing struggles that shape the modern world.

Peter Berger articulates that “those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril.”⁴ Indeed, as José Casanova argues, “we are witnessing the “deprivation” of religion in the modern world.”⁵ That is, religious traditions throughout the

¹ Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 269.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999) 18.

⁵ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1994) 5.

world “are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.”⁶ What Casanova is referring to is the central thesis of Rodney Stark’s “Secularization, R.I.P.”: that for three centuries “social scientists and assorted Western Intellectuals have been promising the end of religion.”⁷ The problematic nature of the secularization thesis is also illustrated by Hugh McLeod, who notes that secularization can mean a number of different things, including at the level of individual belief and practice, at the social and political level, and at the cultural level.⁸ What this fundamentally means is that we need to welcome an understanding of different kinds and levels of religiosity irrespective of regular church-going, and in doing so we must accept the simple fact that religiosity invariably has, and will continue to have, a role in the construction of the modern world.

In *The Religious Crisis of the 1960’s* Hugh McLeod succeeds in this endeavor, arguing that the crisis of Catholic and Protestant churches—observed by a decline in regular church attendance, marriages in churches, and number of baptisms—in the 1960s ought to be seen:

in the context of much longer term developments in Western societies, including notably the growth of religious toleration since the seventeenth century, intellectual critiques of Christianity going back to the eighteenth century, movements of political emancipation since 1789, and changes in thinking about ethics generally and sexual ethics especially since about 1890.⁹

That is, McLeod maintains that explanations for religious change, or variation, is best understood as operating at three levels: the long-term preconditions, the effects of more immediate social changes, and the impact of particular events, movements, and personalities.¹⁰ Without attributing the so-called collapse of Christendom in the 1960s to the tempting albeit broad umbrella of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stark, “Secularization R.I.P.” 249.

⁸ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2007) 264.

⁹ Ibid, 257.

¹⁰ Ibid.

“modernization,” an account that McLeod dismisses as “too sweeping and generalized,” McLeod argues that the Religious crisis of the 1960s, and more precisely a change in religiosity, “did not have any one overriding cause” and rather “arose from the cumulative impact of a variety of smaller factors.”¹¹ What he describes as the “final crisis of Christendom” came in the 1960s and 1970s, “when a variety of developments were combining to undermine existing institutions, values, and moral rules” and which subsequently lead towards a society in which individual freedom became a quasi-sacred and central principle, offering individuals a “much wider range of choices in matters of beliefs, values, and lifestyles.”¹² Noting divisions *within* religions are as significant as divisions *between* religions, and that secularism can take on many different forms, McLeod demonstrates how and why different kinds and levels of religiosity manifested in the 1960s and 1970s.¹³ In doing so, McLeod avoids the crude over-simplification of a supremely complex story.

This methodological approach to exploring religious variation is useful in understanding the political mobilization of the New Christian Right in the 1980s and its consequences on the American political system. Indeed, this mode of analysis is implicit in Casanova’s comparative historical sociology, which traces:

the transformation of Evangelical Protestantism in America from public hegemonic status as a civil religion during the nineteenth century to its sectarian withdrawal into a fundamentalist subculture in the late 1920s to its public reemergence and mobilization in the 1980s.¹⁴

In demonstrating the long-term preconditions for the emergence of the New Christian Right, Casanova maintains that the “exceptionalism” of the American fundamentalist phenomenon

¹¹ Ibid, 259.

¹² Ibid, 256.

¹³ Ibid, 245.

¹⁴ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 8.

“needs to be viewed in terms of the historically peculiar process of secularization in America.”¹⁵ That is, without explicitly articulating it, Casanova’s understanding of “three consecutive processes of disestablishment” operates on McLeod’s three levels of understanding changes in religiosity: the long-term preconditions, the contingent effects of more immediate social changes, and the impact of specific events, movements, and personalities.¹⁶

The first “disestablishment,” the secularization of the state, with its origins in the United States constitution, brought about the separation of the state from ecclesiastical institutions and the “dissociation of the political community of citizens from any religious community,” but it did not dismember the plausibility structure of religious belief itself.¹⁷ Thus, religion remained “an important ingredient of American politics from the very origins of the American party system,” which reveals how Evangelical Protestantism could attain “hegemonic control over the public discourse of American civil society.”¹⁸ This hegemony, however, faded with the “second disestablishment” which can be understood as “the secularization of American higher education” and “the emergence of a pluralistic system of norms and forms of life,” a period Casanova associates with the Civil War and reconstruction.¹⁹ From the first to the third disestablishment, this peculiar process of secularization at the social and political level, and at the cultural level meant that the interpretation of the First Amendment was “progressively extended from the constitutional protection of the ‘free exercise of religion’; to freedom of inquiry, thought, and speech; to freedom of conduct.”²⁰ Thus, while the first mobilization of Protestant Fundamentalism won the Scopes trial, it’s ultimate failure to win the “broader public and the

¹⁵ Ibid, 135.

¹⁶ Ibid, 135

¹⁷ Ibid, 136.

¹⁸ Ibid, 136-137

¹⁹ Ibid, 136-145

²⁰ Ibid, 145.

larger battle” to dominate the last quarter of the twentieth century did not, as the secularization thesis might suggest, mean the death of religion.²¹

The second mobilization of Protestant fundamentalism in America was also contingent on more immediate social changes, and the impact of specific events, movements, and personalities. Casanova articulates that with Jerry Falwell “New Right political entrepreneurs finally found somebody from the Religious Right with whom they could talk business,” that he “became the movement’s key resource,” an analysis which suggests the historically contingent impact of a specific personality in the context of more immediate social changes associated with the effects of greater affluence, changes in the areas of gender and sexuality, and an increase in the range of beliefs and world-views. In addition to raising “concerns” and “grievances” with immediate social changes that emerged during “the long 1960s” regarding the evolution of the family, children’s rights, the feminist movement, the right to life, homosexuality, television, pornography, education, rock music, drugs and alcohol, Falwell’s message, through his prominent American political organization Moral Majority, Inc, also articulated less government interference in the economy, and that “uncontrolled government spending, runaway inflation, and a weakened defense posture against communism” was a threat, like never before, to America’s freedom.²² In order to understand how “the New Christian Right established its electoral credentials as a bona fide faction of the right wing of the Republican party” one cannot remove the historically contingent religious alliance with a rising neoliberal ideology, which itself cannot be understood outside of the collapse of Bretton Woods in 1971, and the ‘stagflation’ that followed, in which the Keynesian belief that government ought to maintain economic stability appeared to self-destruct and a zealous faith in free markets came to dominate

²¹ Ibid, 137-145.

²² Ibid, 150-165.

politics.²³ This “deprivation” of religious forces, as Casanova terms it, epitomized by the New Christian Right, requires that we rethink and reformulate the relationship between religion and modernity, which is to say existing theories of secularization.

Perhaps dismissing the secularization theory as “useless as a hotel elevator that only goes down” as Stark would have it is a bit extreme.²⁴ Indeed, Casanova’s analysis of the transformation of Evangelical Protestantism in America emphasizes the importance of “the historically peculiar process of secularization in America.”²⁵ To be sure, modernization, as Peter Berger notes, “has had some secularizing effects, more in some places than in others.”²⁶ Yet historical progression, far from leading to a certain decline of religion, either in society or in the private minds of individuals, has also “provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization.”²⁷ Thus, in order to understand the historical emergence of New Christian Right, one must re-imagine the relationship between religion and modernity, rethink the intermeshing of public and private spheres, and qualify religious decline or privatization as ‘historical options’ rather than facts. That is, one must embrace an understanding of various kinds and levels of religiosity that are historically contingent on long-term preconditions, the effects of more immediate social evolution, and the impact of specific events, movements, and personalities.²⁸ Indeed, rethinking the relationship between religion and modernity is necessary if history is to ever illuminate why religious traditions throughout the world refuse to accept the marginal and privatized role secularization presumably was supposed to ensure. To historicize modernity one cannot assert that secularization occurs in totality; to historicize modernity one must embrace an

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Stark, “Secularization R.I.P.”, 269.

²⁵ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 135.

²⁶ Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, 3.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 257.

understanding of different kinds of religiosity, in which religiosity can and does participate in the construction of the modern world.²⁹

Bibliography

Berger, Peter. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999)

Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1994)

McLeod, Hugh. *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2007)

Stark, Rodney. "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999)

²⁹ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 212.