
GOD'S CONTINENT
Christianity, Islam, and
Europe's Religious Crisis

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Godless Europe?

Eldest daughter of the church, what have you done with your baptism?

Pope John Paul II

When American Christians discuss the moral state of their nation, especially if they are from the conservative or evangelical end of the religious spectrum, they commonly assume that the Christian faith is in steep decline in the United States. Such an approach amazes American liberals, who worry instead about trends to theocracy, and it staggers Europeans, who are constantly impressed by the vigor of American faith, no less than its confident public expression. In Europe, in contrast, it is tempting to conclude that Christianity is sick or dying. Though ancient churches stand as visible monuments, defining the landscape of cities and villages, most have lost their traditional role as thriving centers of community. At least in its institutional form, and that is an important distinction, European Christianity seems to be terminally ill.

Recessional

A local analogy might help Americans to understand the extent of the crisis. Just imagine that in the United States, Christianity was represented almost exclusively by the liberal mainline churches—Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, Congregational, and the rest, and no other bodies existed to compensate for their shrinking membership or attendance figures. In such circumstances, it would be tempting to graph the accumulating statistics of decline to determine just when, in a few decades, the sole surviving parishioner would be forced to turn out the lights on the last church. Of course, Americans have, besides the mainliners, a plethora of thriving and well-attended alternative churches: most European countries do not.

Any number of indices demonstrate the weakness of European Christianity. In terms of belief, most simply, several different surveys regularly ask people in various nations how important religion is to them. In some Muslim nations, around 90 percent declare that religion “plays a very important role” in their lives, while the U.S. figure in 2002 was about 60 percent. The average figure for Europeans was 21 percent, though of course with national variations. The figure for Italy was 27 percent, Germany 21 percent, and France and the Czech Republic 11 percent. Unlike the United States, moreover, religious disaffection is not merely expressed in nonparticipation in church activities. A significant number of Europeans declare themselves atheist or non-religious. A survey of British respondents in 2004 found only 44 percent admitting to belief in God, with 35 percent denying that belief, and 21 percent “don’t know.” Among those aged 18 through 34, atheist respondents rose to 45 percent. Between 1973 and 1994, the proportion of French people claiming no religion grew from 11 percent to 34 percent.¹

In terms of specific Christian doctrines also, surveys trace a sharp decline in belief. In 1957, 71 percent of British respondents declared that Jesus was the Son of God, but by 2001, the figure had fallen to 38 percent. Breaking such responses down by age group suggests the speed with which Britain is moving toward a post-Christian society. Asked whether Jesus ever lived, which is scarcely a major concession to Christian orthodoxy, 80 percent of those over 65 said that he had, while only 54 percent of those aged 18–24 agreed. And that survey preceded the phenomenal impact of Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, which has since 2003 popularized the idea of a Jesus who existed but whose teachings had nothing in common with any traditional concept of Christianity.²

Low levels of religious belief are reflected in figures for attendance, though the enormous disparity in reported rates for Christian loyalties means that we have to use this evidence cautiously, always asking what exactly is being measured. Combining separate surveys can yield puzzling results: surveys taken within a couple of years of each other by equally competent firms apparently showed that while 72 percent of British people claimed to be Christians, only 44 percent of the nation claim any religious affiliation. Similarly, when we read a despairing comment that only some tiny fraction of a given population attends church, that does not necessarily mean that Christianity is near extinction in that society. The figure cited might well refer to those reporting weekly attendance, rather than “regular” or occasional attenders, who still profess Christian loyalties.³

With that caveat in mind, though, European levels of church attendance fall far short of American, and the situation is deteriorating fast. Around 40 percent of Americans report visiting a place of worship

weekly, compared to less than 20 percent in most of Europe. According to some estimates, the British attendance figure is 15 percent, with 12 percent in Germany, and Scandinavia below 5 percent. If those figures seem low, then the news for Christians is still more depressing. Those rates include attendance at any place of worship, whether church, mosque, or synagogue, so the European figures include Muslim believers. At the other end of the scale of religious practice are those who never or “practically never” attend a place of worship. The American figure for seldom or never attending a place of worship is 16 percent. As of 2000, though, such absentees made up 60 percent of French respondents, 55 percent in Britain, and between 40 percent and 50 percent in Scandinavia and the Low Countries. Young people are much more likely to be never-attenders than regulars. The number of young British people attending Anglican services has halved just since 1979, and only 6 percent of those aged 15 to 29 attend. Between 1900 and 1960, half of those baptized in the Church of England later went on to confirmation: that figure is now 20 percent. In 2005, the English Church Census reported that, since 1998, half a million people stopped going to a Christian church on Sundays.⁴

Such figures would be troubling enough for church leaders if they represented a steady level of low activity, but they do not: the trends are clearly downward and have been so since the 1960s. In Britain, Callum Brown argues that “quite suddenly in 1963 something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organized Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance.” During the 1960s, “the new media, new gender roles and the moral revolution dramatically ended people’s conception that they lived Christian lives.” Decline accelerated in the post-1975 decade, when most of Britain’s Christian churches lost around 20 percent of their adult membership, and matters have deteriorated still further since then. In the words of conservative British writer Danny Kruger, “More than 70 per cent of us claim to be Christian. But only four per cent of us go to church on Sundays. Church membership has fallen by a quarter over the past quarter-century: extrapolate forward and the prognosis is not good.” Former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey has suggested that if the Church of England were a human being, “the last rites would be administered at any moment.” He sees the church “as an elderly lady who mutters away to herself in a corner, ignored most of the time.” Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, Archbishop of Westminster, has said that “Christianity, as a sort of backdrop to people’s lives and moral decisions—and to the government, the social life of the country—has now almost been vanquished.”⁵

In Germany similarly, the Evangelical Church, EKD, which includes most Protestants, has lost over half its membership in the past half-century. Though in theory the church claims the loyalty of around

a third of the population, some 28 million notional members, only a million or so demonstrate any regular religious participation. The proportion of babies born in Switzerland who were baptized was 95 percent in 1970, but 65 percent in 2000.⁶

As we will see, the picture of religious indifference is not uniform, and Christian adherence remains strong in parts of New Europe, especially Poland and Slovakia. Yet eastern and central Europe also have their bastions of secularism. In the closing years of European communism, the churches generally flourished on the strength of their opposition to repressive regimes, but matters changed when the old dictatorships collapsed, and the public gained access to secret police files. In some countries, it became painfully obvious how thoroughly the state apparatus had penetrated the churches, recruiting clergy as spies and propaganda agents.⁷

Such scandals were not inevitably fatal, at least where the structures of belief were secure. The Polish Catholic Church, for instance, has survived a scandalous claim that perhaps a tenth of its priests cooperated with the secret police, while the faith of Slovak Catholics has not been visibly dented by charges that their archbishop collaborated. In other countries, though, like the former German Democratic Republic, such scandals administered the coup de grâce to already weakened churches. Today, some regions of the former Soviet bloc look as secular as the Netherlands, if not more so: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and the former East Germany all register very high percentages of adults reporting no religion. According to the European Values Study, “fewer Czechs claim allegiance to organized religion than any other people in Europe, except Estonians.” Only a third of Czechs belong to a religious denomination and about 12 percent attend services once a month or more. Today, over 60 percent of Czechs identify themselves as atheists, compared to just 19 percent who believe in God.⁸

Generally, decline has been far more marked in formerly Protestant areas, such as Britain or Denmark, than in nations with a strong Catholic heritage, and that difference is as marked within particular nations. Looking at the former Czechoslovakia, the mainly Protestant Czechs secularized rapidly, while their Catholic Slovak neighbors did not. Yet Catholics can take little comfort from this distinction, which might indicate not a qualitatively different fate, but rather a cultural delay of a decade or two.

Catholic Crisis

Across western Europe, religious nonparticipation is now marked among Roman Catholics, who until fairly recently maintained a high level of practice. In theory, of the ten nations with the largest Catholic

Table 2.1 The World's Largest Catholic Communities

<i>Nation</i>	<i>Number of Catholics (millions)</i>
Brazil	145
Mexico	94
Philippines	69
USA	64
Italy	58
France	45
Colombia	38
Spain	35
Poland	34
Argentina	34
TOTAL	616

Source: www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/sc1.html.

populations, no less than four are European, namely France, Spain, Italy, and Poland (see Table 2.1). Yet figures for regular church attendance must raise questions about the degree of involvement. Around a third of Italian Catholics claim to attend mass weekly, though other estimates suggest a rate closer to half this. This compares to 18 percent in Spain and 12 percent in France. The figures for Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands run between 10 and 15 percent. Between 1975 and 1990, the number of Catholic baptisms in Europe fell by 34 percent, the number of weddings by 41 percent. Changing social attitudes are reflected by the impressive drop in fertility rates and family size from the 1970s onward. According to one comparative study of European nations, in the 1970s, fertility rates in strongly Catholic countries exceeded those in other countries by “almost a half child per woman” (a curiously phrased measure!). By the 1990s, however, fertility had so dropped in these Catholic countries that they “averaged the lowest rates in Europe, about half a child lower than that of the strongly Protestant countries.” Today, as German sociologist Ulrich Beck notes, “In western Europe, there is a rough rule of thumb according to which the closer one gets to the Pope, the fewer children one has.”⁹

Though Catholics share very much the same range of social and cultural influences that affected other denominations, some special factors applied in this instance. As in the United States, part of the decline in Catholic loyalties and solidarity must be attributed to the effects of the second Vatican Council that met between 1963 and 1965, but which did not have its full impact on parochial life until the 1970s. Though the council’s effects were complex, they included an elevation

of the role of the laity, which made the priesthood a less attractive profession, while the transformation of the mass and the introduction of vernacular languages made the ceremony less mystical and more mundane. The very swift decline of the rite of confession also detracted from priestly power and prestige. Changes in devotional practices, such as the rules for fasting and abstinence, reduced the cultural markers separating Catholics from non-Catholics and eroded a sense of cultural distinctiveness.

To stress the role of "Vatican II" does not necessarily mean subscribing to the traditionalist Catholic argument that the reforms launched by Pope John XXIII were of themselves negative or destructive. Many of the worst effects arose not from any decisions of the Council itself but in how they were implemented in practice, at the local level. The Council was intended to bring the Church more in line with some powerful secular trends, but few could have foreseen just how overwhelmingly powerful these social currents would have been in the post-1965 decade, or how poorly prepared the hierarchy was to deal with them.

The rapid pace of reforms raised expectations of a more thorough accommodation with the secular world, which might for instance include clerical marriage, the approval of contraception, and greater tolerance of homosexuality. When the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* reasserted traditional teachings against contraception, liberals were shocked, while many ordinary Catholics made the decision to use birth control whatever the church ordained, a dramatic departure from familiar patterns of obedience. Once that precedent was established, it became easier to contemplate disobeying the church in other matters, including political causes, and in tolerating more easygoing sexual practices. Also during the 1970s, the publicity surrounding high-profile Catholic liberals like Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx undermined the idea that Catholic leaders spoke with a single voice. And the popularity of liberation theology encouraged young Catholics to challenge hierarchical structures in the church as much as in society at large. The focus of many priests on left-liberal political activism also created the impression that believers might just as well pursue their struggle for justice in secular settings, since the church seemed to offer no distinctive message. Not until the election of John Paul II did the Vatican once more project an air of confidence and assurance, a sense that the church spoke authoritatively on moral and political issues. By that point, though, many Western Catholics were already deeply disaffected with the institutional church.¹⁰

Particularly worrying for Catholic authorities is the precipitous decline in practice in several nations that in the 1960s would have been regarded as heartlands of the faith. In Italy and Spain, church attendance has been in steep decline since the early 1990s, and each new

survey depicts the situation in grimmer terms than a predecessor from a year or two previously. The hard core of observant Catholics, long the bedrock of Catholic power, has contracted steadily, to become an aged remnant. In France in 1950, perhaps a quarter of the population was *pratiquant*, compared with under 5 percent today. Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne has said that "We've never had as much money as in the last 40 years, and we've never lost the substance of the faith as much as in the last 40 years. . . . In the Cologne archdiocese, there are 2.8 million Catholics, but in the last 30 years we've lost 300,000. For every one baptism, there are three funerals."¹¹

The clearest example of institutional implosion is Ireland, which as recently as the 1970s enjoyed the highest level of religious practice in Europe: 85 percent to 90 percent of Catholics regularly attended Sunday mass. When Pope John Paul II visited Dublin in 1979, the million people who gathered to greet him symbolized the continuing power of Catholic Ireland, a nation that still at that date prohibited contraceptives and refused to allow divorce. Even today, Ireland records figures for regular church attendance that are impressive by European standards and close to American norms: about half of Irish Catholics probably attend mass weekly. For most nations in Europe or North America, even that diminished figure would represent a spectacular manifestation of religious devotion; but this is Ireland, where expectations are so much higher. Moreover, underlying trends among the young reflect those of the wider Europe. In the words of one Dublin professional, "I don't go to church, and I don't know one person who does. Fifteen years ago, I didn't know one person who didn't."¹²

Catholics also suffer from the falling number of vocations to the priesthood or the religious life, so that surviving clergy today increasingly tend to be old men, commonly in their sixties or seventies. Europe as a whole had 250,000 priests in 1978, counting both diocesan and religious priests, but that number fell to 200,000 by 2003.¹³ Decades of state repression might explain the shortage of priests in a nation like the Czech Republic, where the average age of priests is sixty-seven, and only half the parishes have a priest in residence; but that figure is quite close to the situation in democratic western Europe. France, typically, had 50,000 priests in 1970, but barely half that number by 2000. Shortages of priests and contracting numbers of the faithful have led the church to close or consolidate parishes, making quite outdated the once-familiar institution of the well-known parish priest faithfully serving a village or an urban parish. The consequences of decline are evident in any region of France. In Normandy, "the pastor of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Évreux in Normandy, must minister to two other area churches. Two dozen more under his authority have no priest and remain closed except for a few holidays and special occasions." In the diocese of Cahors, priests must care for thirty or even forty churches, in which elderly

clergy meet graying parishioners. In many villages, the question is whether a church will even survive in a decade or two. That diocese, like many others, survives on manpower imported from the global South, commonly from Francophone West Africa.¹⁴

The number of seminarians has plunged. While Europe in 1978 accounted for 37 percent of candidates for the priesthood worldwide, the figure for 2003 was only 22 percent, with a marked decline in numbers setting in around 1995. At the height of postwar enthusiasm in 1966, the Catholic Church in France ordained 566 men, compared to just 90 in 2004. In the 1990s alone, the number entering French seminaries fell from 1,200 to 900. The famous seminary of Saint Sulpice, near Paris, is built to accommodate two hundred pupils if the demand was there, but today it actually houses only fifty. Many are from global South nations such as Vietnam and Rwanda, which outsource to Europe the task of clerical training. Even Ireland's once-booming seminaries have to cope with much smaller enrollments. The nation's great seminary is Maynooth, itself a key monument of the Irish-Catholic tradition. Maynooth, which in earlier eras usually counted on five hundred students at any time, now has sixty, and many of those do not intend to follow the familiar career path that would take them into the priesthood, in Ireland or elsewhere. They are instead lay students interested in the academic study of theology. In 2004, just fifteen men were ordained priests for the whole of Ireland. In a typical year, the archdiocese of Dublin, with around a million faithful, ordains *one* new priest. Time and again, we encounter the rule of ten: in most west European countries, whether we are looking at vocations or seminarians, the present figure is commonly one-tenth of what it was forty years ago.¹⁵

Across Europe too, orders of monks and nuns have contracted, and surviving members of religious orders are much older than their counterparts would have been in earlier decades. In the 1960s, the world's best-known nun was probably Sister Luc-Gabriel (Jeanine Deckers), the thirty-year-old-Belgian "singing nun" who in 1963 had a worldwide hit with her recording of the song "Dominique." (Though other sisters were making far more significant contributions, none of them—including Mother Teresa—achieved anything like the same degree of public attention in those years.) While Sister Luc-Gabriel's case is in no sense representative, her later career did have some points of resemblance with those of many other younger nuns in that era. She grew disenchanted with the church's failure to follow through on the reforms of Vatican II, and in 1967 recorded a song supporting contraception. She left her order and probably lived in a lesbian relationship until she and her partner committed suicide in 1985.

From the late 1960s, convents and monasteries suffered a continuing exodus. Germany in 1971 had 70,000 nuns; today the figure is 30,000. In 1960, France had thirty nuns for every 10,000 Catholics,

but by 2000, the figure was only ten. In the Netherlands, the ratio fell in the same period from seventy-seven to eighteen, in Germany from thirty-two to thirteen. This trend has direct consequences on the public face of Christianity, since religious orders had long been heavily engaged in staffing the schools and hospitals of Catholic Europe. With fewer religious, and specifically nuns, Catholic institutions continued to function, but with ever fewer, and older, sisters.¹⁶

The consequences can be imagined. The Catholic Church must struggle to present its views to a rising generation commonly suspicious of institutional and traditional authority of any kind, and quite accustomed to ideas of gender equality, sexual freedom, and acceptance of sexual difference. The clergy on whom this burden of argument must fall are not only exclusively male but, in most cases, well above the retirement age common in most of Europe. Even apart from hints of sexual deviance, the age and gender of priests seems to confirm every accusation that the church is hopelessly patriarchal, hide-bound, and out of touch with contemporary realities. As an institution, the church becomes indefensible.¹⁷

The Age of Scandal

As in North America, Catholic loyalties have been severely strained by persistent sex scandals over the past fifteen years, scandals that illustrate the apparent hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in condemning the sins of its flock. While these incidents have contributed to declining Catholic practice, they are symptoms of secularization as much as causes. If the Christian consensus had not been undermined already, stories of clerical abuse probably would not have reached the media and would have had nothing like the effect they did. But coming at a time of softening support for the institutional church, their effects were devastating.

Some of the cases involved adult homosexuality, but the most notorious incidents arose from cases of serial child abuse. Catholic dioceses have repeatedly had to deal with clergy who sexually abused or molested young people, including both small children and older teenagers. Abusive priests continued their misdeeds for many years, as church authorities ignored complaints and transferred wrongdoers to new parishes where their criminal careers continued unabated. Such official misbehavior suggested that the church institution was engaged in a systematic cover-up of sexual crime while failing to protect innocent children.

The abuse stories served as a perfect symbol of church crisis. In France in 2001, the Bishop of Bayeux received a three-month suspended sentence for concealing information about a pedophile priest in his diocese. In 1998, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groer, the head of the

powerful Austrian church, was forced to resign following charges that he had molested seminarians many years previously. In 2004, a new Austrian scandal arose when a seminary computer was found to contain child pornography and pictures of priests engaged in sex acts with seminarians. In Great Britain, dozens of Catholic priests have been removed for sexual misconduct since the mid-1990s, and in 2001, the church-sponsored Nolan Report proposed a thorough reform of procedures for reporting and investigating abuse. More recently, extensive abuse charges have hit Ampleforth boarding school, one of the most prestigious institutions of the English Catholic elite. In 2002, a Polish archbishop resigned after he was charged with sexual encounters with young priests.¹⁸

None of these cases had anything like the impact of their Irish counterparts, which have accumulated steadily since the early 1990s. The sequence began in 1992 with what in retrospect seems a relatively mild story, in which popular bishop Eamonn Casey was exposed for fathering a child by a young American woman, and paying her hush money. Shortly afterward, however, accounts of serial molestation by clergy began to emerge, most notoriously involving Fr. Brendan Smyth. This scandal moved beyond church circles when, in 1994, controversy over attempts to extradite Smyth from Northern Ireland provoked the collapse of the Irish government. By 2006, 250 priests were under investigation for child abuse. A long-term study of priests working in the diocese of Dublin implicated over a hundred in possible abuse, a rate comparable to that in major U.S. dioceses like Boston.¹⁹

Scandals reached their greatest intensity in the diocese of Ferns, in the southeast of the country. The epicenter was Fr. Sean Fortune, a grasping and tyrannical parish priest who potentially generated quite enough scandal in many ways, even apart from sexual molestation. After his suicide in 1999, pressure mounted for a systematic investigation of the whole diocese, which eventually appeared in 2005. The Ferns Report was devastating, depicting a diocese with an alarmingly high proportion of sexually troubled priests whose activities were tolerated by two successive bishops. And while a case could be made that authorities in earlier years probably did not appreciate the harmful effects of molestation on victims, Ferns authorities continued to treat abuse cases lightly up to the end of the 1990s. The Irish media, which in bygone years had been reluctant to criticize church authorities, now found no words too harsh for the scandal. The Ferns case involved "pure evil," "abominable evil"; it was the "devil's diocese," "the horror of Ferns." Adding to the ongoing disasters was the scandal of the Magdalene Homes, grim semipenal institutions to which young girls were confined for suspected sexual misbehavior. The homes endured for decades but were exposed in the 1990s, and in 2002 were commemorated in the exposé film, *The Magdalene Sisters*. In 2005, Dublin's new

archbishop delivered an address with the sobering title, "Will Ireland be Christian in 2030?" Though his conclusions are quite positive, the title is meant to stun: will *Ireland* be Christian?²⁰

Christianity Leaves the Picture

The shriveling of church institutions has had complex effects on European societies, most visibly in the form of deteriorating church buildings. When congregations shrink, it makes economic sense to combine parishes, but such a policy can strike a grave blow at religious sensibilities. This is a familiar story in American cities, when closed Catholic churches might represent ethnic and communal loyalty. But imagine the scale of the trauma when the building itself is several centuries old and stands on a site consecrated by Christian worship over a millennium or more. Moreover, the churches contain the monuments, art, and material treasures assembled by that community over the centuries. Great medieval churches were built to assert pride in the community and in the faith, and conversely, the sight of an abandoned or ruined church sends a powerful message about the eclipse of the faith that it symbolized. Across Europe, church authorities agonize over deciding the appropriate fate for disused buildings.²¹

The buildings of England's established church normally stood open and accessible through the 1970s, when concerns about crime and vandalism resulted in their being locked outside service times and thus less available to the curious or pious. Since then, the Church of England has faced constant problems about how to cope with a building stock designed for an utterly different religious landscape. Between 1970 and 2005, the Church closed 1,700 of its structures, over 10 percent of the total. Some have been demolished; developers have transformed others into warehouses and apartments, spas and pubs. The revolution has been just as marked, and as painful, for the nonconformist Protestant churches that coexisted with the Anglicans, the churches of the Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. Just since 2001, some five hundred London churches of all denominations have been transformed into private dwellings. In the 1970s too, British cathedrals began charging visitors for admission, a sound economic decision, but one that sent the disastrous message that these buildings were museums rather than living places of worship.²² Some ancient sites attract visitors uninterested in their orthodox Christian associations, as former abbeys and cathedrals have become centers of a booming New Age tourist trade. Seekers converge on Glastonbury Abbey or Chartres cathedral, or Scotland's Rosslyn Chapel, made famous by Dan Brown. Bowing to the inevitable, some French and German convents and abbeys try to survive by presenting themselves as retreat houses for the New Age-oriented market.

Other tokens of Christian decline are less tangible, but nonetheless significant. Abundant anecdotal evidence, supported by opinion surveys, suggests the depth of ignorance about even the most basic Christian doctrines. One British poll found that over 40 percent of respondents could not say what event was commemorated by Easter. Churches have been forced to respond with remedial measures that would have appalled earlier generations. The standard information leaflet offered to visitors at England's ancient York Minster begins by exploring, "What Do Christians Believe?" A sample:

York Minster is built in the shape of a *cross* to symbolize the most important Christian belief: that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross for our sins. . . . Some [crosses] will show Jesus at his *Crucifixion* to remind us of the terrible death he died. Others will be empty to remind us that death is not the end of the story: Christians also believe in Christ's *Resurrection*. . . . The principal service for Christians is *Holy Communion*. . . .

and so on. Art galleries can assume no knowledge of terms like Ascension and Transfiguration, any more than a casual visitor can be expected to understand the rituals of an Amazonian tribe. One Czech observer complains that her younger compatriots "don't know what Christmas is about. They are lost in art galleries when they see paintings of Jesus Christ. One girl looked at a picture of the Crucifixion and asked, 'Who did that to him?' Her friend responded, 'The Communists.'"²³

Europe's Jews

While contemporary commentators have often noted the decline of Christian practice, similar trends have also affected the other religion with deep European roots, namely Judaism. The massacres and pogroms of the 1940s massively reduced Europe's Jewish population, and many of the survivors emigrated to Israel. Including Russia and the east, Europe accounted for 80 percent of the world's Jews in 1900, compared to perhaps 11 percent today. The whole of wider Europe today contains only some 1.5 million Jews, with just a million in the European Union proper. Though exact numbers are shaky, Europe is home to more Buddhists than Jews.²⁴

Besides the historic factors reducing Jewish populations, we also see powerful secularizing trends. In Britain, Jewish religious leaders are as pessimistic about long-term trends as are their Anglican counterparts. British Jews, of course, escaped the disastrous fate of continental populations, but the communities have since shrunk badly due to the sheer force of assimilation. Fifty years ago, Britain had around half a million Jews, a number that has today shrunk to 266,000. Emigration partly explains this contraction, though counterbalancing this has

been a significant counter migration of Israeli Jews to Britain. A more important explanation has been demography, together with a decline in self-identification. With a disproportionately large number of educated and professional members, Jewish communities usually have small families, and between 30 and 50 percent of British Jews marry outside the faith. In France too, Europe's largest Jewish community has also contracted, if not so dramatically. A Jewish population of 535,000 in 1980 has now fallen to around 500,000, a drop of 7 percent in a very few years.²⁵

The picture is not entirely negative, and there are some signs of growth, chiefly in Germany, where the Jewish population has now climbed to over 200,000. Given the history of the past century, the thought that Germany might soon have more Jews than Britain sounds like a sick joke. To put this change in proportion, though, the increase in Germany does not reflect natural internal growth but rather a rearrangement of existing populations. Around a million Jews have left the former Soviet Union since the 1980s, and while most chose Israel as their destination, a sizable fraction preferred Germany. Even with this apparent revival, then, long-term trends are gloomy. Jews today constitute a minuscule fraction of Europe's population, some 0.25 percent, and that proportion seems set to fall even further. Not just for Christians, Europe does not provide healthy soil for religious institutions.

Public Faith

For American observers, the transatlantic religious difference is most evident in terms of the public expression of faith. For all the rhetoric of the separation of church and state, Americans are well accustomed to politicians invoking God and religion, even if in merely conventional terms: no member of the U.S. House or Senate publicly admits to atheism. Matters in Europe are generally quite different. When Great Britain joined the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair initially planned to end his address to the nation with a remark like "God bless you." His horrified advisers urged him to remove such a phrase, which for them, connoted "American-style" religious fanaticism or hypocrisy. In Germany, the former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and several of his cabinet refused to add the anodyne formula "so help me God" when swearing their oath of office.²⁶

Other recent events demonstrate a hostility of political elites at least to any acknowledgment of religion, and arguably to the toleration of overt Christian sentiment as such. During the debates over the European Constitution at the start of this decade, framers sought an exalted protocol that would describe the roots of European values and civilization. Though many wished to include at least a passing nod to

the Christian heritage, others strenuously resisted even such an acknowledgment. Instead its preamble declared,

Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, which, nourished first by the civilizations of Greece and Rome, characterized by spiritual impulse [sic] always present in its heritage and later by the philosophical currents of the Enlightenment, has embedded within the life of society its perception of the central role of the human person and his inviolable and inalienable rights, and of respect for law.

The 70,000 words of this prolix document thus fail to include a single specific reference to Christianity. This omission was appropriate for those who believed, in the words of former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, that "Europeans live in a purely secular political system, where religion does not play an important role."²⁷

For George Weigel, the constitution affair indicates the "self-inflicted amnesia" provoked by Christophobia among Europe's elites, for whom Christianity is at best irrelevant, at worst an obstacle to social progress and the expansion of human rights. Historically, this reactionary image was far from inevitable. On many issues, the churches found no difficulty supporting liberal or even socialist reforms, and both Catholic and Protestant churches have for over a century included powerful components supporting social activism. Labor unions have long been able to ground their operations in the clear statements of Catholic social teachings. From the late 1960s, however, social reform increasingly became identified with issues of personal identity and rights, particularly as these involved gender and sexuality. On some critical issues, especially abortion and gay rights, secular progressives found themselves in stark conflict with traditionally minded Christians, by no means only within the Roman Catholic Church.²⁸

One contentious issue has been the spread of forms of gay marriage or civil union, a recognition of homosexual status that goes far beyond the mere removal of legal impediments to personal sexual expression. The idea is so controversial because homosexuality is so explicitly condemned in the Christian scriptures, not to mention in centuries of scholarly tracts and commentaries. As Pope Benedict writes, the mere idea of gay marriage "would fall outside the moral history of humanity." The spread of liberal legislation in this area provides a rough index of secularization. As recently as the 1970s, the gay marriage issue barely existed even as an idea for most Europeans, but it has since become commonplace. In 1989, Denmark became the first nation to approve civil unions, and over the following decade, most Scandinavian countries allowed gay couples adoption rights. By 2001, several European nations including France and Germany had introduced some form of civil union granting same-sex partners rights comparable to those of heterosexuals, and Britain followed by 2005. The

Irish government has promised that some form of civil partnership will soon be introduced in that nation too. Generally, liberal north European nations of Protestant heritage took the lead in liberalization, but Catholic states followed only a little way behind, despite staunch opposition from the Vatican and local church hierarchies. In 2001, the Netherlands became the first country to approve full-scale “gay marriage,” followed by Belgium in 2002 and Spain in 2005. In the Spanish case, the legislation was strongly supported by Socialist Prime Minister Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who on this and many other matters stood out as an aggressive opponent of church influence and doctrine.²⁹

Gay issues indicate the mainstreaming of attitudes and policies condemned by most Christian churches, to the point that Christian critics of homosexuality found themselves labeled as politically deviant, and perhaps as too extreme for public office. As the European constitutional debate was in progress, Italian politician Rocco Buttiglione was a candidate for the position of European Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security, the kind of appointment that is rarely challenged. Buttiglione, however, had expressed the view that, based on his Catholic faith, homosexual behavior was sinful. However, he continued, “I may think that homosexuality is a sin but this has no effect on politics, unless I say that homosexuality is a crime. . . . The state has no right to stick its nose into these things, and nobody can be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation.” Yet with all these qualifications—mildly expressed, from an American perspective—he was rejected for the office.³⁰

Pursued to its logical outcome, the decision excludes any and all Christians of traditional or orthodox leanings from office within the European Union, and soon, presumably, within member states. In 2006, Catholic politician Ruth Kelly acquired a new position within Britain’s Labour government as Minister for Equality: the office’s title itself reflects a dramatic statement about the proper scope of government intervention in social arrangements. Kelly, however, was widely attacked because her religion, and especially her affiliation with the rightist group Opus Dei, attracted charges that she would be unable to act sincerely on behalf of gay equality. Critics pressed her to declare forthrightly whether she felt that homosexuality was a sin. In a response that would have startled most earlier generations of Christian politicians, Kelly replied only that “I don’t think it’s right for politicians to start making moral judgments about people. That’s the last thing I would want to do.”³¹

Like the Buttiglione affair, the Kelly controversy suggests the subordination of Christian moral imperatives—even the right to “make moral judgments”—to liberal concepts of personal rights. Tony Blair reputedly holds strong Christian beliefs and is said to be on the verge of conversion to Catholicism. Yet when discussing his views in the

media, he sounds apologetic. Asked if his faith shaped his politics, he replied, almost nervously, “Well I think if you have a religious belief it does, but it’s probably best not to take it too far.” Buttiglione himself uses such cases to argue that the European Union is succumbing to “soft totalitarianism,” founded upon a state religion that is “an atheistic, nihilistic religion—but it is a religion that is obligatory for all.” Former Irish Prime Minister John Bruton sees in the constitution controversy “a form of secular intolerance in Europe that is every bit as strong as religious intolerance was in the past.”³²

How Much of a Change?

In many ways, then, organized Christianity is in dire straits in most European nations, and certainly in comparison with the United States. Of course, before we can talk about “decline,” we need to specify the earlier period to which we are comparing, and we cannot simply assume that religion in general or Christianity in particular has always attracted the loyalty of the European masses. Religious indifference and militant unbelief were both commonplace in the nineteenth century, when plebeian religious sentiment was often diverted into secular movements such as socialism, anarchism, and communism, and we can see each of these rivals as religious in their particular ways. Each used its sacred symbols and banners, venerated its martyrs, possessed its own ritual calendar and familiar songs, and all shared a powerful eschatological vision. Across the continent, it was a commonplace that churches of all shades had failed to penetrate the rising cities and industrial centers, and horrified religious activists complained at the staggering religious ignorance expressed by the poor of Paris, London, or Berlin. If modern Europeans are denounced for preferring the occult or mystical to religious orthodoxy, so were their forebears in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³³

Yet when full allowance is made for the peaks and valleys of religious enthusiasm, Christianity enjoyed a strength and popularity from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1960s that was far more solid and pervasive than anything we see today. To say that is of course to make no necessary claims about the quality of that faith—millions of Christians succumbed to the fascist temptation in the 1930s—but the cultural force of the religion is indisputable. Much of the appeal of Winston Churchill’s wartime rhetoric was its explicit appeal to the idea of Christian civilization, which stood in absolute day and night contrast to the Nazi regime. The threats arising from armed conflict helped focus minds on the supernatural and stimulated a revived interest in spirituality. We think of the vast popularity of C. S. Lewis’s writings in Great Britain, the work of Henri de Lubac in France, or the postwar surge in vocations by military veterans.³⁴

This enthusiasm survived the war. The Taizé monastic community was organized in 1949. Among Catholics, Marian devotion reached new heights with the proclamation in 1950 of the doctrine of the Assumption. Through the 1950s, a series of Marian apparitions excited the faithful in Amsterdam—an amazing thought in a setting that would become synonymous with religious decline. The euphoria surrounding the coronation of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 gave a renewed visibility and prestige to the Church of England, and to the link between church and state. The stunning success of Billy Graham's European crusades in 1954–1955 demonstrated the continuing power of evangelicalism: Graham's final meeting in London attracted 200,000, gathered in two massive stadiums.³⁵

After 1945, too, the churches were critical to social and moral reconstruction across Europe, and German leaders like Cardinal Josef Frings enjoyed enormous prestige in a devastated society. In several nations, the main counterweight to the communist challenge was the Christian Democratic parties, rooted firmly in the Catholic tradition. The Moral Rearmament movement was at its apogee, and the group organized the conferences at which German and west European leaders gathered to foster reconciliation, and to lay the groundwork for what became the European Community. Through the 1950s, the project of European unification found fertile soil in Catholic political circles. The European flag—twelve stars arranged in a circle—was borrowed from traditional images of the Virgin Mary, the woman crowned with the stars, though with the central figure diplomatically omitted. Catholic labor organizations also remained potent. In noncommunist Europe, both Catholics and Protestants knew a complex world of interrelated Christian schools, organizations, societies, and leagues, a whole civil society linked at least notionally to churches. When communists took power in eastern and southeastern Europe after 1945, they rightly identified the Catholic clergy as the most likely source of determined resistance and they singled out obstreperous priests and bishops for persecution. Thousands suffered violence, death, or imprisonment. Across Europe, then, the churches genuinely were flourishing in the mid-twentieth century, which makes their subsequent decline all the more striking.³⁶

Commentators have not been shy in offering explanations for the apparent death of Christian Europe, and some theories are far more convincing than others. Some of the commonsense approaches are actually among the weakest, particularly those that link the decline to the bloody political experiences of the twentieth century, the churches' alleged involvement in wars and totalitarianism. For all their other effects, though, events like the Nazi occupation played little role in modern secularization. In most countries, the churches played a role that was at least creditable, and sometimes heroic, and charges about alleged Vatican complicity with the Nazis have never gained much credibility

outside the United States. To the contrary, Pius XII remained for most Catholics an inspiring symbol of anti-Nazi resistance, and the scurrilous fantasy of "Hitler's Pope" had not yet been invented. As we have seen, Catholic and Christian Democratic politics enjoyed enormous success through the 1960s.

Explaining Secularization

Other factors, though, contributed mightily to the decline of religion, apparently making Europe a wonderful model of secularization theory in action. If these explanations are correct, this would have dramatic implications for the fate of other religions in that same environment, and particularly of Islam.

Secularization theory portrays traditional institutional religions as fitting best in a premodern or prescientific setting dependent on agricultural production. Circumstances change when new economic arrangements disrupt older communities and advance urbanization and industrialization. Modernity is characterized by the rise of "empirical science and technology, of industrialization and capitalism, of urbanization and social mobility, of legal bureaucracy, democracy and the nation states." Modernity promotes individualism, privatization, and the dominance of a scientific worldview that makes obsolete religious claims to provide healings or miracles. The modern welfare state provides the social services and education once supplied by religious-based charities or movements, so that citizens know they can comfortably rely on government-provided assistance in time of crisis. Once ordinary believers can assert with confidence that "the state is my shepherd," organized religion declines sharply. This does not mark the end of religion as such, since a notion of higher powers appears to be hard-wired into our consciousness, but now the religious instinct is manifested in a more personal, autonomous, nondogmatic and nonjudgmental spirituality.³⁷

At first sight, Europe seems to fit this pattern splendidly, offering an impressive negative correlation between economic development and traditional piety. European churches have felt the full force of secular rivalry usurping their traditional functions, with the growth of social welfare systems from the start of the twentieth century. Secular-minded Europeans are happy to accept this explanation of religious decline, which they use to rebuff pessimistic American accounts about Europe's alleged moral and social collapse. In this view, Europe has suffered neither a loss of faith nor of its will to survive: there is no Europe Problem. To the contrary, the United States should worry that it has not matured socially and economically to the point that it can afford to abandon the crutch of religion.

The best argument in favor of secularization theory is the gradation of religious decline across Europe and how well that correlates

with economic development. The deepest-rooted welfare states are those of Scandinavia and northern Europe, where orthodox Protestantism has been in free fall for many years, while Great Britain has long been the most urbanized and industrialized section of the continent. Classic secularization theory would predict the most advanced decline in traditional religion in nations such as Britain, the Netherlands, and Sweden, and that is what we find.

Since the 1950s, industrial growth has been marked in areas that had largely escaped the earlier waves of development, and it spawned mass migrations from rural areas in Spain, Italy, and France. It is not just a coincidence that the areas of western Europe demonstrating the most marked and rapid secularization in the last quarter of the century were exactly those that experienced conspicuous economic growth and modernization in those years. These included Ireland, following its accession to the European Community in 1973; Spain, after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975; and Italy, which boomed during the 1980s. All three were economic laggards in the 1960s: as late as 1975, 43 percent of Italy's economically active population worked in agriculture, and over a quarter of Italians lived in small towns or villages. In 1987, though, Italy triumphantly celebrated its *Sorpasso*, the moment when its GDP (temporarily) overtook that of Great Britain. Irish GNP per capita grew from just 60 percent of the EU average in 1973 to match that average in 2001, while Ireland's per capita GDP actually exceeded the British figure during the 1990s. Ireland became the Celtic Tiger, an Atlantic counterpart to the then-booming economies of the Pacific Rim. And in these very years—roughly, the last quarter of the century—levels of church attendance and vocations were declining rapidly. Conversely, countries like Poland maintained both a strong rural and agricultural sector and high levels of religious practice.³⁸

Adding to the crisis of traditional religion and morality was the growing social status of women in an economy founded on the information and service sectors. Women entered increasingly into the world of paid employment, and also into the public sphere. Business and the mass media recognized the importance of women as consumers of both material goods and of popular culture. Soaring divorce statistics indicate both new expectations by women and stresses on traditional concepts of family and gender roles. Britain and Germany have long held the unenviable record for the fragility of marriage, but since the early 1990s, divorce rates have grown sharply in what were once the most solidly Catholic lands of Europe. Between 1995 and 2004, the divorce rate grew by 89 percent in Portugal, 62 percent in Italy, and 59 percent in Spain. While Irish rates are much lower, the country finally legislated the possibility of divorce in 1997, following a contentious referendum in which the Yes side gained a paper-thin margin of 50.28 percent.³⁹

Doubts about the chances of lifelong commitment make people more cautious about entering into marriage, especially when no stigma is attached to unmarried couples living together, or to illegitimacy. The word, illegitimacy, is itself fading into disuse because of its judgmental connotations. In Britain and France, around 40 percent of births involve unmarried mothers, and the Norwegian figure is 49 percent. Even in Ireland, the illegitimacy rate is over 30 percent. Across Europe, households are smaller, and people are far more likely to be living by themselves or in transient relationships. Between 1971 and 2004, the number of British households containing just one person grew from 18 percent to 29 percent of the national total.⁴⁰

By the 1980s, family and gender issues increasingly played a central role in national politics, with a growing social focus on themes of enhancing women's rights and protecting women from harassment and sexual violence. Other powerful issues on the social agenda were child protection and the struggle against child sexual abuse, both increasingly defined in much more ambitious ways than hitherto. Meanwhile, working women were more concerned about regulating their fertility, resulting in greater social pressure for easy access to contraceptives and, in many nations, to abortion. The growing separation between sexuality and reproduction made it vastly easier to present a case for gay rights, which advanced alongside political feminism. If the bearing and raising of children was no longer the primary goal of married heterosexual couples, by what right could marriage be denied to homosexual pairs?

Moreover, while European economies have experienced all the same pressures as the U.S.—a move to a postindustrial economy, a huge upsurge in female employment, the growth of feminism—these changes have been still more far-reaching in Europe because of the greater tradition of enforcing social change through law. The European Union has strongly encouraged women's emancipation and equality, using measures that many Americans would find startlingly interventionist, and some individual nations have gone still further. In Spain, long one of Europe's most entrenched social backwaters, the national government proposed in 2006 that women must make up at least 40 percent of the candidates from any political party and provide the same share of the members on corporate boards. Portugal now requires that women must comprise a third of the names on all electoral lists.⁴¹

The changing role and expectations of European women contributed massively to the decline in family size in west European nations, and the birth dearth commonly cited as a looming potential crisis for the European Union. These social transformations also had religious consequences, especially for the Catholic Church, with its male-dominated character and its staunch opposition to contraception and abortion. In a society marked by women's social emancipation, an institution that appears determined to resist that trend in every possible

way is likely to be regarded as outmoded and unacceptably antimodern. When abuse scandals further suggest that that church tramples the interests of children as well as women, it is bound to become the target of pervasive hostility.

The End of the Chain

Declining religious participation coincides neatly with the trend to much smaller families, though we can argue about the exact relationship between empty pews and empty cradles. One recent study stresses the wide-ranging social effects of the decline in vocations, and especially the shrinking cohort of nuns. According to this argument, fewer school and parish activities, fewer social services, and less of a Catholic support network meant that young couples faced much higher "shadow costs" in child-raising, and most decided to limit their families. This approach is broadly convincing, although it is difficult to separate cause from effect in such matters.⁴²

While the shrinking number of children reflected social change, it also had its own powerful impact on religious life and thought. Only by taking children out of the picture can we appreciate how much of the institutional life of any religion revolves around the young. At the height of the baby boom in the 1950s and 1960s, churches of all shades devoted immense effort to teaching and socializing the young, whether in Sunday schools or classes for first communion or confirmation. While teenagers and young adults might drift away from religious practice, they were likely to return when they had young families of their own, to whom they hoped to pass on values and a sense of community. When adults returned to church life, they judged religious institutions by the quality of their programs for the young.

But without the children, very different attitudes prevail. Imagine a region like the Italian province of Ferrara, which for most of the past century bustled with children. Since 1986, though, the birth rate has fallen below 0.9 in every year, with the consequence of closing schools and worryingly quiet streets. A priest who in the 1970s might have guided 1,200 children through the confirmation process in a year now deals with perhaps a tenth of that figure, with all the consequences for diminished family interest and involvement in the life of the local church. The linkage between low fertility and secularization is not perfect. Though Catholic loyalties still thrive in Poland and Slovakia (and clergy and nuns are both abundant), these countries are marked by characteristically low European birth rates. Yet in the absence of countervailing cultural and historical trends, religiosity often declines alongside family size.⁴³

The absence of children has more subtle long-term consequences. George Weigel remarks on the striking European reluctance to discuss

or acknowledge death and thus to explore its spiritual dimensions. Partly, this reflects a growing trend to medicalization, as people die in hospitals rather than at home, but German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski also stresses the role of low birth rates:

In the past, it wasn't possible to ignore death. Living in large families meant that people learned to deal with death as a matter of course. An atomized society of singles, on the other hand, will suppress thoughts of death, and this will create an underlying sense of panic. All this results in a dramatic lack of maturity in the way people choose to live their lives. . . . for childless singles, thinking in terms of the generations to come loses relevance. Therefore, they behave more and more as if they were the last and see themselves as standing at the end of the chain.

Without a sense of the primary importance of continuity, whether of the family or the individual, people lose the need for a religious perspective.⁴⁴

The Limits of Secularization

For the sake of argument, let us assume that secularization is indeed closely connected with social and economic modernization, and especially with the changes in gender attitudes wrought by those processes. From some perspectives at least, it is a deeply optimistic idea, since it assumes that recent immigrants, especially Muslims, will experience the same collapse of religious fervor when exposed to European culture and society, and that present signs of militancy or extremism represent a last-ditch effort to defend traditional religious systems that are already under siege. This is a critical conclusion for the fate of European Islam and, by implication, for the practice of Islam in the countries from which Europe's Muslims derive, in Pakistan and Turkey, Morocco and Algeria.

But are current theories of secularization correct? Interpretations that seem to work well in Europe perform abominably badly when tested in the United States. Claire Berlinski, for instance, uses a familiar secularization model to explain what she sees as the annihilation of European Christianity in modern times: "The rise of modern science facilitated the death of Christianity . . . by replacing religion as a framework to interpret human experience." But the obvious retort is to ask how the United States experienced the impact of modern science, not to mention very much the same range of social and economic forces, but with quite different outcomes. As conventionally stated, secularization theory provides only a part of a much more complex story.⁴⁵

Following rapid industrialization, the United States experienced an early decline in its rural population, with the 1920 Census the first to show the urban population representing a majority. The United States has continued to thrive and innovate economically, usually far

better than its European counterparts. In terms of overall wealth, measured by GDP per capita, Europeans are 25 percent worse off than Americans, and the gap is widening. By the same measure, a leading European nation like France is about as rich as one of the poorer American states, such as Alabama or Mississippi. And although they may fall short of European standards of comprehensive welfare provision, Americans can expect extensive public support in times of poverty, unemployment, or old age. In terms of gender equality, too, and the proportion of women in the workplace, the United States is comparable to the most developed nations of western Europe.

Particularly strange is the demographic divide. The United States experienced its own baby boom, of course, followed by a plunge in birth rates that between 1970 and 1985 actually left the country with lower fertility than western Europe, and with a relative dearth of children. Yet far from that decline being manifested in a collapse of religious loyalties, churches and religious institutions of all kinds flourished in these same years. Subsequently, despite all the factors apparently promoting small families, U.S. birth rates bounced back impressively in the 1990s, and have remained high. Today, the United States is one of the few nations in the world—not just among the advanced countries—to resist the trend to sharply falling fertility.

Whether we are measuring statistics for belief or attendance, religion does survive in the United States. Moreover, its strength is evident throughout the country, and not just in the red states of the South and Midwest, where Republican candidates dominated in the opening years of this century. European visitors are usually amazed not just by the public affirmations of faith in political life but by the evident signs of religious life—the abundance of active churches, the proliferation of new church buildings, and not least, the vast car-parks designed to accommodate legions of congregants. Of course, some American churches have floundered, and some Protestant mainline denominations may be entering terminal crisis. Yet decline in these groupings has been more than offset by the growth of other churches, often of more conservative and evangelical temperament. And many of the most successful new churches and denominations operate in areas of vigorous economic growth and innovation.

Roman Catholics present a surprising component of the story. After years of internal dissension in the church, largely involving debates over gender roles and sexuality, American Catholics were battered by the sexual abuse scandals that reached new heights with the revelations in the Boston Archdiocese in 2002. Yet even in such an atmosphere, the proportion of Catholics who report attending mass at least weekly held steady from 2000 through 2005, at a solid 33 percent. To say the least, the American model poses difficulties for secularization theory.

Free Markets

We have three ways of explaining the situation. Either Europe is following the natural path of secularization, from which the United States has deviated; or the United States represents a normal trajectory, while Europe is different; or else secularization theory itself is flawed. In explaining Europe's Exceptional Case, Grace Davie argues that Europeans have not so much accepted secularism en masse, but rather that their history has led them to see religious institutions almost as public utilities, to provide services as needed, rather than as in the United States, where believers see churches as voluntary associations demanding their support and participation.⁴⁶

Even so, we must wonder why American and European trajectories should be so very different. Why would the United States be so conspicuously more actively religious than other nations, a fact noted by European observers since the earliest years of the Republic? In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that "there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America." De Tocqueville found part of the difference in the role of church establishment: Europeans created formal links between church and state, linking religious practice to political loyalty, while Americans separated church and state. "In Europe," he noted, "Christianity has been intimately united to the powers of the earth. Those powers are now in decay, and it is, as it were, buried under their ruins. The living body of religion has been bound down to the dead corpse of superannuated polity; cut but the bonds that restrain it, and it will rise once more."⁴⁷

In modified form, many contemporary observers still see weight in this argument, believing that American religion flourishes in a free market environment that contrasts to the monopolistic character of European churches. According to this view, religious practice is highest in competitive situations, and weakens under the force of monopoly. The larger and more varied the supply available to fickle consumers, the higher is the demand. Some European nations did and do grant particular churches official status and a preferred role in public life, so that even the most liberal nations of northern Europe pursue practices utterly puzzling to Americans, such as collecting a church tax. And in some of these nations, especially in Protestant northern Europe, the decline of the state church seems closely linked to the near-collapse of institutional Christianity.⁴⁸

Denmark offers a classic case study of the dead hand of monopoly: 83 percent of the population are nominally affiliated with the Lutheran state church, the Folkekirke or People's Church, but only 1 percent or 2 percent attend with any regularity. Meanwhile, church resources are overwhelmingly devoted to the upkeep of historic buildings and

virtually nothing to education or evangelism. Many argue that the church tax itself discourages religious participation, since payers feel that they have already done enough for their religion and feel no need to attend services. Nor does the church care particularly about the beliefs of its clergy, or at least that was the lesson of a recent scandal in which pastor Thorkild Grosbøll kept his job after proclaiming his rejection of basically every Christian doctrine, including the existence of God and the Resurrection. In this instance at least, the state church monopoly looks like a recipe for the gradual uprooting of religious belief. One study of the church's role in Danish life is aptly titled *The Distant Church*, and the institution seems to recede further into the background with every passing year.⁴⁹

Official monopoly, moreover, sometimes accompanies the active discouragement of rival churches that can provide alternative vehicles for those disenchanted with the official religious regime. Spain's Catholic Church long enforced its religious hegemony and made life difficult for Protestant rivals: under Franco, the official ideology, religious and political, was *Nacionalcatolicismo*. When Catholic practice declines, therefore, no other forms of Christianity are available to believers, who face the choice between official religion and no religion at all. In theory, at least, dissidents find secularism the only viable alternative.⁵⁰

In other cases, though, we see the limitations of the free market argument. For one thing, the fact that a state church long succeeds in suppressing all rivals does not mean that such competitors cannot emerge quite successfully when that stranglehold is removed. Across Latin America, Catholic churches long exercised an official power quite comparable to their counterpart in Spain, yet this history has not prevented Pentecostal and evangelical churches from surging in popularity over the past thirty years. The question is not why Spaniards or Danes were unable to organize new churches beyond the establishment, but why they have not felt the need to do so. When we note that states with monopoly religions have low levels of religious observance, we should not confuse cause and consequence. Perhaps the religious monopoly just means that people have not felt the need to set up rival religious bodies.

In other European countries, too, religious establishment by no means implied monopoly, since granting legal privileges to one particular denomination does not mean that disaffected believers were not free to move to other denominations, or to create their own free market if they chose. In western Europe at least, it is some centuries since most states had the will or the ability to suppress religious dissidence outside the official establishment. In England or Wales, the established character of the Church of England meant that more radical Protestant groups such as Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists labored under

some legal difficulties, but these Nonconformist sects still managed to flourish. From perhaps 1840 through 1960, the sects substantially outnumbered the official church population in industrial regions of the country, where they probably represented the Christian mainstream. England and Wales long offered an example of a competitive free market quite as vibrant as that of the United States. During the late twentieth century, though, these Nonconformist or Free Churches experienced a collapse in numbers at least as dramatic as that of the Anglican establishment.⁵¹

Ireland offers a still clearer example of the chasm separating the legal fact of establishment from the creation of a working monopoly. From the sixteenth century through the nineteenth, the legally established church of Ireland was the Protestant Anglican body associated with the British Crown. Only in the 1860s did the government give up the shallow pretence that this body was anything other than an elite minority denomination massively outnumbered by the Catholic presence. In France, the obviously powerful Roman Catholic Church was not established, and at various times in the twentieth century it was in acute conflict with the secular regime.⁵²

Elsewhere, we find strong evidence of thriving religious practice in countries where churches enjoy near-monopoly status. Ireland again offers a convincing example of a church near-monopoly on religious life, and as we have seen, for all its recent difficulties, the Catholic Church still maintains a hold over a large section of the population. In Poland too, a nonestablished church holds the loyalty of the overwhelming body of the people, and by any statistical measure, religious life flourishes. Consumers freely exercise their power of choice, but they do so by attending different churches or parishes of the one Catholic entity. Whether legally enforced or not, neither legal establishment nor monopoly status does much to explain the relative weakness of organized Christianity in much of modern Europe.

Religion and Mobility

We must then look elsewhere for the dramatic and continuing differences in religious behavior that separate modern Europe and the United States. One distinguishing feature is America's constant history of immigration, and the ethnic diversification that accumulates over time. When people move to a new country, they form institutions that allow them to combine together for mutual support and to help them share and transmit the values of their familiar societies. Commonly, the most important such institutions have been religious, whether churches, synagogues, or mosques. Through American history, successive waves of immigration have produced many new denominations, which at least for the early generations are closely linked to national or

ethnic loyalties. As Martin Marty famously remarked, ethnicity is the skeleton of American religion.⁵³

Also, involvement in migrant churches produces a much greater degree of active religiosity than was common in the home country. This was true, for instance, of Italian-Catholic migrants to the United States during the early twentieth century, who came from societies with a lively streak of anti-clericalism, and in which religious life was often assumed to be a female preserve. On American soil, however, Catholic practice and identity both grew more intense. Among modern Latino immigrants likewise, the journey from Central America to El Norte produces much greater religious interest and involvement than is customary at home, and the new enthusiasm resonates through both Catholic and Protestant congregations. Of course, international population movements have also occurred in European history, in terms of both labor migration and political exile, but until modern times the continent has known nothing to compare with the constant infusions of new stock that have marked the United States.

Within the United States too, domestic mobility has been much greater than in Europe. Throughout American history, people have moved far and often, to the point that late twentieth-century families were quite likely to uproot and move their homes every few years. Moreover, such movements have occurred over a much larger geographical area than is common in Europe, and this would be the appropriate place to point out the very different geographical scale of the two regions under discussion, a theme to which we will return on several occasions.

As a country, the United States is far larger than any European nation. If we take the eight European nations with the largest land areas (France, Spain, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Norway, Italy, Great Britain), then their combined physical size is still less than a third that of the United States. Britain covers about the same land area as Oregon, Italy as Arizona; Belgium is about the size of Maryland. The United States is a nation; it is also a subcontinent. An American who travels from New York City to Dallas has traversed 1,600 miles but remains entirely within a single nation throughout the trip. A European who travels a like distance has gone from London to Moscow, perhaps, or to Istanbul; or has gone from Stockholm to the far south of Sicily. In the process, our European traveler has passed through or over several different nations, cultures, and language zones. Traveling from New York City to Phoenix covers 2,500 miles of United States territory. A comparable journey within the Old World would take a traveler from London beyond the confines of Europe altogether, into Kazakhstan or Iraq, or to the legendary African city of Timbuktu.

The difference in geographical size has many implications, but let us just consider the consequences for internal migration. A German or a British person who relocates to the far distant end of his or her own country has usually traveled at most a few hundred miles, while a move of comparable distance within the United States might well leave a family within the same state. Even before the advent of modern air travel, a migrating European was thus likely to maintain touch with his or her roots, unlike an American counterpart who moved, say, from the East Coast to the West Coast. In the United States, therefore, frequent movement and internal migration are more likely to leave individuals cut off from their homes and familiar social networks, driving them to seek new networks and forms of instant community. Often, the best and easiest place to find such interaction is within a hospitable church in a well-known denomination, a singularly attractive setting for young families with children. A society marked by constant movement, by frequent uprooting and replanting, by ever-growing cultural diversity is more accustomed to seek the institutional support of religious bodies, and also to accept the spiritual ideas presented in that environment. Attendance at these institutions thrives, even as styles of belief and practice increasingly accommodate to the standards of the wider society and as denominational distinctions fade steadily. Secularization theory does work in general, but other factors can counterbalance it.

While such social factors do not necessarily offer a complete explanation of Euro-American differences, they are suggestive. They also have implications for projecting the likely religious coloring of a Europe that has in recent decades accepted non-European migrants on an unprecedented scale. Powerful social pressures drive migrant communities to conform to European secular norms. The most potent of all concern gender roles and concepts of family, with birth rates and numbers of children as a vital index of assimilation to European societies. At the same time, though, constant infusions of new stock help make mosques, churches, and temples the critical centers for immigrant religious life, promoting a sense of community and ethnic identification. Thus Turks in Germany or Moroccans in Sweden are likely to attend mosques, much more so perhaps than they might have done in their home countries. Continuing immigration and extensive cross-border movement do not defeat the process of secularization but might well slow or modify it. Ethnicity might yet become the skeleton of European religion.

Not even the most optimistic observer could pretend that European Christianity is in a healthy state, whether in comparison with global South societies, or with that great transatlantic anomaly, the

United States. But institutional weakness is not necessarily the same as total religious apathy, and among all the grim statistics, there are some surprising signs of life. European Christians, after all, have the longest experience of living in a secular environment, and some at least attempt quite successfully to evolve religious structures far removed from the older assumptions of Christendom. Contrary to widespread assumptions, then, rising Islam will not be expanding into an ideological or religious vacuum.