

The Post-Secular in Question

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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The Post-Secular in Question

*Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey,
and Jonathan VanAntwerpen*

Are we living in a post-secular world? That question has surged onto the academic agenda, marked by the increasing scholarly use of the notion of the “post-secular.” From the writings of Jürgen Habermas on the role of religion in public life to a host of more theoretical reflections on religion in contemporary society, the idea of the post-secular has acquired increasing currency in contemporary academic discussions.¹ The outpouring of books and journal articles on the topic signals an important shift in scholarly thinking about religion and secularism. Yet it should also give us pause; the term has at times been used uncritically, and we should be wary of its deployment simply to signal a contested claim about the resurgence of religion. That said, there is no doubt that the notion raises a number of important issues concerning both the place of religion in twenty-first-century society and its status as an object of study in the academy.²

Why the renewed interest in religion? The notion of the “post-secular”—suggesting that we have left a secular era behind—implies a tectonic shift in the *Zeitgeist*. But here some caution is in order. Amid the proliferation of “post-” terms in recent academic discourse, it is important to consider whether the concept of the post-secular refers to an actual shift in the social world, or whether its growing deployment results, instead, from a zealous need to detect epochal turning points in every minor twist of the historical road. (The brief career of “post-nationalism”—a term that garnered much attention in the social sciences just a decade ago but now appears wildly

overdrawn—provides a cautionary tale.³) The inquiries into and assessments of the postmodern that have had staying power were engaging, in part, because they called sharply into question the ethical and epistemological certitude and purported superiority of the modern project. In other words, the disputes over postmodernism revolved around the naming of a diminishing and even dying core of modernity—Fordist capitalism (e.g., Jameson, Harvey); truth, rationality, and knowledge (e.g., Foucault, Lyotard, Feyerabend); European culture and Orientalism (e.g., Said); and so on.⁴ The development of postmodern discourse is instructive for making sense of the post-secular, insofar as postmodernism can be read in at least two different ways. In one reading, postmodernism claims that modernity is over and hence that we live in a “postmodern” era; in another view, postmodernism insists that the universalistic claims associated with modernity can no longer be sustained without demurrals.

And so it goes with the post-secular. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Peter Berger argued that “the world is just as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”⁵ While some would claim that there has been a simple resurgence of religion, Berger saw both continuity and upsurge. In so doing, he was reversing his earlier judgment of the matter: earlier in his career, he had been one of the main promoters of secularization theory. Bearing in mind such shifts in the thought of a major sociologist and social thinker like Berger, we ask: Is it the social scientists’ vision that is crooked, while the historical road is straight? To what other constructive narratives about the secular and the religious do scholars and everyday people alike appeal in order to help make sense of the world?

The question of the post-secular poses two lines of inquiry: first, determinations about the state of religiosity in the world; second, understanding the new ways that social scientists, philosophers, historians, and scholars from across disciplines are and are not paying attention to religion. In other words, the question is: Which world has changed—the “real” one or the scholarly one? To some degree, the contributors to this book argue that the answer is “both.” By many measures, there is, in fact, a religious resurgence of global dimensions, but this resurgence is not taking place with much uniformity around the globe.⁶ Rather, it is taking many forms—not all of which fit into an easily codifiable definition of “religion.” The recent outpouring of academic work on religion in the social sciences and philosophy is partly a response to this resurgence—but only partly. A growing unease with

“Enlightenment fundamentalism” and broadening skepticism about scientific naturalism in many quarters have also made it easier for many academics to take religion seriously again.⁷ In the context of claims about religious resurgence, the essays in this volume grapple with the legacies of secularism and secularization theory, the contested categories of religion and the secular, and the diverse claims associated with the concept of the post-secular.

In the remainder of this introduction, we offer an overview of the shifting patterns of scholarly attention to religion; the relations between the religious and the secular; the history of philosophical and social scientific understandings of religion; disciplinary differences in the study of religion; and a brief consideration of the future prospects for the social scientific study of religion.

Patterns of Scholarly Attention to Religion: Causes, Connections, Consequences

The Iranian revolution, the Moral Majority, the Pentecostal explosion, the post-socialist Buddhist revival,⁸ faith-based initiatives, communal violence, the politics of the veil, the inconclusive “Arab spring,” and, of course, 9/11: In retrospect, it is not difficult to understand why religion has found its way back to a central place on the scholarly agenda over the last decade. More puzzling, perhaps, is why religion took so long to return, and why it was pushed to the margins in the first place. (Disciplines such as religious studies and, to a lesser degree, anthropology—for which religion has always held center stage—are notable exceptions.) While the contributors to this volume all share this perplexity, they propose different answers.

On one account, the collapse of structural functionalism in the social sciences precipitated the marginalization of religion.⁹ Under the reign of Talcott Parsons in sociology—a dominant mode of the *ancien régime* of modernization theory in the social sciences—“norms” and “values” were seen as the woof and warp of social order, and religion as their raw materials. But by the 1960s, the old regime had met with a general rebellion, and other approaches and perspectives began displacing structural functionalism. Among the new approaches and perspectives was the amalgam of Marx and Weber known as “conflict theory,” which highlighted the role of “power” and “interests” in social life while relegating religion to the category of “ideology,” when not ignoring it altogether.¹⁰ Allies in revolution, “neo-Marxism” and “left

Weberianism” became enemies in power. Social scientists found common ground with philosophers, perhaps most distinctively in the discourse generated by the Frankfurt School. It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that Habermas has played such a pivotal role in these revolutions of thought.¹¹ The ensuing debate over the nature of social class, the “relative autonomy” of the state, and, more broadly, the relative importance of capital and states in determining the fundamental shape of modern social phenomena “in the last instance” was eventually superseded in another palace coup known as “the cultural turn.”¹² The renewed attention to culture in history and the social sciences beginning in the late 1980s reopened the door for the return of religion.¹³ Religion could now be conceived not merely as an “ideology” but as “a cultural structure,” “a social organization,” or “a movement frame,” among other things.¹⁴ Let us call this the “post-Parsons interpretation.”

An alternative view holds that the erasure of religion from the social scientific agenda actually occurred a good deal earlier, during the opening decades of the twentieth century, and resulted from the retreat of religious conservatives from public life and the declining influence of religious elites and institutions on higher education—which is to say, from the secularization of public life and academic institutions. Just as Baptist congregations withdrew into their “hard shells” and Congregationalist ministers were banished to divinity schools at the turn of the twentieth century, the academy saw the eventual formation of departments of “religious studies.”¹⁵ Subsequently, religion was rendered invisible—and risible—to many academic researchers. On this account, the return of religion to the scholarly agenda is traceable to the upsurge of “public religions” in the late 1970s and to the prodigious inflow of foundation monies for scholarly pursuits related to religion in the decades that followed (as documented by John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen Mahoney in chapter 9 in this volume).¹⁶ Notwithstanding the prodigious efforts of Robert Bellah—and, in a different vein, Peter Berger—in shoring up the sociology of religion in the American academy, this disciplinary formation remained an outlier for researchers and institutions alike.¹⁷ One might call this the “secularization interpretation” of the decline of religion’s perceived importance in the social sciences.

A third view maintains that the return of religion to the academic agenda is an interesting but minor subplot in the recent history of higher education, whose main story line is the increasing marginalization of the humanities and social sciences within the modern research university.¹⁸

Because universities are increasingly reliant on private and public largesse, and because such funding goes disproportionately to research in the natural sciences, engineering, and medicine, little of this money finds its way to researchers working on religion. Accordingly, while there may be some upsurge of interest in religion on American college campuses today, it is likely to be and to remain quite limited. This might be dubbed the “materialist interpretation.”

Yet another interpretation suggests that the decline in overall scholarly attention to religion correlates with a decline in individual religious commitments among social scientists (there was not much room for decline among philosophers). If the rise of the social sciences was closely connected to religiously motivated reform projects—such as the Social Gospel, for instance—and if some form of religious belief was still quite common just a few generations ago, most social scientists have now moved to a position somewhere “beyond belief.” Personal irreligion intersects with scholarly insecurity, as Robert Wuthnow has argued, insofar as social scientists have a certain anxiety about the scientific status of their disciplines, which leads them to distance themselves from religion. It is possible that these forces combined to reduce academic attention to religion in the social sciences. This might be referred to as the “secular intellectual interpretation.”

Whatever the causes of this scholarly inattention to religion—and they are many and varied—the consequences are clear enough: some of the most important features of modern life have been misapprehended or ignored entirely.¹⁹ States and bureaucracies, revolution and reform, voluntary associations and social movements, human and civil rights, corporations and welfare states—these and many other building blocks of Western modernity have religious genealogies.²⁰ Whatever differences they may have in terms of approach, the contributors to this volume share the view that it is impossible to make sense of the world without taking account of religion and that a social science inattentive to religion cannot hope to be adequate to the realities that it seeks to elucidate.

The essays gathered here thus address a number of urgent issues concerning how scholars approach religion today. They ask: What is the place of religion in the contemporary academic scene? How and when did religion decline as a matter of scholarly concern? How does the scholarly status of religion vary according to location in the institutional field of higher education? How are research and teaching on religious matters funded, and what

impact do funding patterns have on what gets studied? Inevitably, among the central themes of their reflections are the nature of the religious, the increasingly contested character of the secular, and their interrelations.

Relations between the Religious and the Secular: New Understandings of an Old Distinction

Throughout the twentieth century, the “dominant paradigm” in the social scientific study of religion was secularization theory.²¹ Over the last two decades, the “secularization thesis”—roughly, that modernization undermines religion—has been subjected to searching reexamination.²² While the old orthodoxy still has its defenders, particularly in Western Europe, the general drift of the commentary, especially in North America, has been moving in the direction of skepticism, particularly with regard to two key predictions of the secularization paradigm: that religion would undergo decline, and that it would become subject to privatization.²³ In truth, the fate of “churchly religion” (let alone personal spirituality) has been far more varied and complex than secularization theory suggested, even in secularism’s Western European strongholds.²⁴ Meanwhile, the place of religion in public space and debate is now the subject of energetic and sometimes vitriolic debates, among pundits and philosophers alike.²⁵ Witness the ongoing debate about integrating Muslims in Western Europe, or the intellectual combat between “separationists” and “accommodationists” in courtrooms and law schools in the United States. In this atmosphere, secularization theory looks more like a partisan political program than a “value-free” social theory. The view that reason would replace religion and, more fundamentally, that reason is opposed to religion—the conventional wisdom among right-thinking intellectuals just a generation ago—is now being called into question. Perhaps it was the secularists rather than the religionists who were blinded, not by darkness, but by *les lumières* of Enlightenment reason. While many assumed that religion was an ailing patient in the back wards of historical development, it was engaged in a worldwide revival tour.

Be that as it may, we should not be too quick to equate today’s religious resurgence with a “de-secularization of the world.” As José Casanova and others have rightly emphasized, secularization theory actually consists of at least three analytically distinguishable hypotheses: (1) the decline of religious belief; (2) the differentiation of religious and nonreligious spheres;

and (3) the privatization of religious commitments.²⁶ In Casanova's view, the decline and privatization theses must be rejected, but the differentiation thesis is essentially correct. There are good reasons to think that religion is, in fact, less central to the governing institutions of the societies of Latin Christendom (d.b.a. "the West") than it was five hundred years ago and that, at least at this level, the secularization thesis makes some sense, and not only in Western Europe. If anything, the line "between church and state" is even more sharply drawn in the United States, at least in terms of legal principles and often in terms of institutional arrangements as well.²⁷ As regards individual beliefs and public engagement, however, the United States is perhaps the least secular country in the West. Indeed, one of the reasons that the secularization thesis has come to seem so dubious is the "anomalous" status of the United States, a clear outlier by most metrics.²⁸ From a global perspective, however, it is Western Europe that stands out as "the exceptional case," while the United States appears strikingly "normal."²⁹ Little wonder, then, that the staunchest defenders of the secularization paradigm are to be found in Western Europe, where its predictions have the greatest empirical traction, as John Torpey discusses in chapter 11 in this volume.

As Talal Asad and others have noted, the terms "religious" and "secular" can really be understood only in relation and opposition to each other. Thus, any redefinition of the secular necessarily involves a redefinition of the religious, and vice versa. For example, an expansive definition of religion, such as Durkheim's or Luckmann's, will find religion everywhere, even in putatively secular and mundane activities, such as professional sports or solitary walks.³⁰ Conversely, an expansive definition of secularity, such as Wilson's or Bruce's, will find secularity everywhere, even in churches and synagogues.³¹ To wit, by imposing a particular definition of the subject, it is possible to predetermine the outcome of the debate. Nor is this the only complication. For one thing, the liminal space between the religious and the secular is now occupied—indeed, has long been occupied, as Courtney Bender shows in chapter 3—by a third category: the spiritual.³² Yet the meaning of this category is also highly contested, outside the academy and, increasingly, inside the academy as well. Some define spirituality in opposition to "organized religion," but what, then, should we make of Tibetan prayer bells in suburban megachurches or of "Bu-Jew" rabbis on college campuses? Others define spirituality in opposition to scientific rationalism, but how, then, can we explain card-carrying cosmologists who cite the Kabala

or, for that matter, the mystical reverence for nature among “new atheists” like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens? The difficulty here, as so often in the social sciences, is that the “categories of analysis” we use in our academic writing are also “categories of practice” that are contested in public debate.³³ Whatever our intentions, then, our definitions are never really “neutral.” Of course, old hands in the study of religion are well versed in these difficulties and are quick to add the appropriate caveats and qualifications to their definitions. Whence concepts such as “lived religion,” “believing without belonging,” and “invisible religion,” which draw our attention to the limitations of a “churchly” definition of religiosity?³⁴ But even sophisticated typologies such as these become fraught when transported outside the context of Abrahamic traditions. Greater attention to Asian religion, for example, complicates another set of conceptual categories that are used to stabilize the meaning of religion—categories such as “belief,” “orthodoxy,” “community,” “philosophy,” “intellectual,” and “science.” As Richard Madsen shows in chapter 2, it is not clear that the category of “religion” really has much purchase in the Chinese context.

Coming to Terms with Religion

Is there something about religion that necessarily escapes the analytical frameworks of the social sciences but that finds better expression among philosophers and historians? Historically, social scientists have been of two minds on this question. On the one hand, those who embrace the skeptical and materialist epistemologies that arose during the Scottish and French Enlightenments (e.g., with Hume and d’Holbach), particularly the monist-materialism that Jonathan Israel has christened the basis of the “radical Enlightenment,” are apt to answer in the negative.³⁵ From this perspective, which has roots that extend back through the neo-Epicureanism of Hobbes and Bayle to the atomistic materialism of Lucretius and Democritus, religion is a chimera rooted in ignorance and fear.³⁶ The “scientific atheism” of classical Marxism belongs in this lineage (though Marx’s own views on this subject were more complicated), as does much orthodox secularization theory, including the recent work of Norris and Inglehart, which traces religious belief to “existential insecurity.”³⁷ On the other hand, those more influenced by Kantian and neo-Kantian epistemologies, who maintain the sharp distinction between scientifically comprehensible “phenomena” and

experientially inaccessible “noumena”—between “things of experience” and “things-in-themselves”—and the strong emphasis on the limits of human understanding that follows, will be more inclined to answer in the affirmative. Because the two “founding fathers” of the contemporary sociology of religion—Durkheim and Weber—were both so strongly influenced by neo-Kantianism (the “spiritualist” neo-Kantianism of Renouvier, on one side, and the southwest German school of Rickert, on the other), most Anglo-American sociologists of religion are inclined to answer this question in the affirmative.³⁸ Weber’s famous remark that he was “religiously unmusical” captures the sense of a potentially impassable divide between the rational, logical mind and the putatively ineffable qualities of religious experience. In this view, social scientists can study the ideas, rituals, practices, and institutions that make up *la vie religieuse* even if they may personally experience religious life as more noumenal than numinous, more incomprehensible than awe-inspiring. As much as he admired the ethical conviction and consistency of Tolstoy, Weber himself was unwilling to make the “sacrifice of the intellect” that he believed religious commitment necessarily required.³⁹ It should be added that this way of seeing things is easily reconciled to certain—namely, “liberal” and “spiritualist”—forms of religiosity, which emphasize inner experience, ethical commitment, and social change more than, say, rational theology, communal belonging, and doctrinal orthodoxy. This is the conception of religious experience that arises out of the Romantic appropriation of Kant by Schleiermacher and then finds its way into the Anglo-American world along various paths, including Emersonian spirituality, Kierkegaardian fideism, and Victorian moralism.⁴⁰ On such a reading, the social sciences can even function as a “negative theology” of sorts, a purifying agent that helps to identify nonreligious accretions to religion—that is, the various ways in which history, culture, power, and interests have tarnished and corrupted the core truths and messages of a pristine religiosity accessible only through the authentic experiences of religious virtuosos, past and present. H. Richard Niebuhr combined theology and social theory in precisely this way.⁴¹

And yet, the neo-Kantian dispensation had costs as well as benefits. On the positive side of the ledger, by explicitly bracketing the question of religious truth, and by implicitly distinguishing the ineffable truth of religion from its sociocultural contaminants, the neo-Kantian approach marked off certain aspects of religious life as susceptible to sociological analysis

(dogmas, rituals, hierarchies, communities, and so on) and made possible a scientific sociology of religion that was not just a scientific critique of religion. This enabled a *modus vivendi* that maintained that certain forms of religion (read “observable” and “verifiable”) are appropriate objects of analysis for sociology. On the negative side of the ledger, this *modus vivendi* also presumed that religious belief was somehow irrational, that faith cannot be founded on reason, and, in the Weberian version, that all “value commitments”—religious and secular—are grounded in subjective experience and not subject to objective analysis.⁴² Social science, in Weber’s phrase, was to be “value free.” This claim has been much criticized from within the social sciences, of course, by those who argue that the value commitments of social scientists affect not only the kinds of questions the individual researcher asks, as Weber had claimed, but also the sorts of answers he or she gives; that individual values always lead to subjective “biases” of various sorts; and that these biases, moreover, cannot be fully neutralized or controlled by methodological procedures. Interestingly, this line of argument also gave rise to a corresponding theology. Protestant theologians and philosophers from Cornelius Van Til to John Frame followed suit and turned the tables on positivistic versions of social science, arguing that all worldviews, the scientific worldview included, rest on unprovable and untestable “presuppositions” whose *prima facie* validity is no more and no less “testable” than the divine revelations of historic religion.⁴³ More recently, neo-Aristotelian and neo-Thomist philosophers and theologians such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Jacques Dupuis have elaborated an even more radical critique of the neo-Kantian dispensation.⁴⁴ Drawing on the Aristotelian argument that human beings have a certain *telos*, and also working from the premodern theory of natural law elaborated by the Scholastics (not to be confused with the modern theory of natural rights initiated by Grotius), MacIntyre and company critique subjectivist, “emotivist,” and “therapeutic” forms of ethics, arguing that the nature of “the good life” and “the good society” is rationally and even objectively determinable.⁴⁵ In this regard, they are moral realists. Put plainly, they contend that the physical constitution and intellectual capacities of human beings are such that we can “flourish” and achieve genuine “well-being” only in certain sorts of societies and not in others.

From the other angle, theology and religious sensibility unabashedly entail ethical considerations that social scientific ideas of objectivity and “value-freedom” have tended to banish from the social sciences. If the latter

remain committed to a stance that insists that it cannot engage hermeneutically with moral postures, however, is it not condemned to viewing religion forever from “the outside”? One senses a need for that Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” that would allow both the religious person and the (secular) social scientist to make themselves mutually comprehensible to each other.⁴⁶ Indeed, Gadamer’s insistence that presuppositions are always operative in inquiries, whether scientific or moral, is a methodological correction that has gained widespread acceptance. The status of ethics in the social sciences immediately comes into play in any serious rethinking of their relations with religion—a problem that Gorski addresses, in connection with Durkeim’s sociology, in chapter 4.

Is such a “fusion of horizons” really possible? Or must the conversation between the religiously inspired person and the secular social scientist be a dialogue of the deaf, an endgame of foregone incommensurability? The primary question, however, is whether or not these realms can be so neatly cordoned off from each other. Religious people are not necessarily dogmatists (though they may be, of course). Schools of theology exist precisely to hash out the meaning and consequences of the fine points of “dogma.” Assuming that all (or at least much) theological thought is subject to communicative discourse, how different is the religious from the social scientific? How one assesses the possibilities for a constructive dialogue between religion and the social sciences depends on the understanding each has of itself and of the other. If the social scientist understands “religion” as an irrational response to fear, and if the religionist understands “social science” as premised on an arbitrary set of presuppositions, then little dialogue is possible. By contrast, if the social scientist understands religion as a rational interpretation of telos and cosmos, and the religionist understands social science as a search for the best society, then the two can walk hand in hand. Somewhere between these extremes, one finds something like Habermas’s recent conversation with Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI).⁴⁷ Habermas insists religions must accept elements of modernity, particularly the fact of religious pluralism, the leading role of science in making sense of the world, and the constitutional-democratic organization of the polity. Nonetheless, he concedes that historic/positive religious traditions retain a sense of unredeemed utopian promise that may have been lost with the development of more secular ideas of salvation, and that modern, secular societies therefore lost a vital moral resource.⁴⁸

In many cases, the opening of the academy to the study of religion has been accompanied by a growing openness to the contributions of self-consciously religious scholars. This trend is perhaps most evident in writing on the history of religion, but important strides toward a renegotiation of relations with religious worldviews have occurred in philosophy and other disciplines as well. While some will view this development with equanimity or even enthusiasm, others will undoubtedly worry that the inclusion of religious perspectives in the academy may undermine the wall of separation so arduously erected between faith and reason. Needless to say, the apparent rapprochement between science and religion has provoked gales of hostility from those who regard them as twain that ne'er should meet.

Disciplinary Differences in the Study of Religion

American higher education had its roots in the training of clergy and other professionals, and it thus bore a deep religious imprint. But while it once dominated the ethos of the college or university, the scholarly study of religion has since come to be distributed across a variety of different disciplines and schools. Today, seminaries have only a tenuous connection to mainstream academic life. Divinity schools connected to universities are administratively and often geographically separate from colleges of arts and sciences. Furthermore, departments of religion or religious studies are often ghettoized in relation to other disciplines. Even within the discipline of the so-called study of religion, heated debates continue over whether religious studies should also include the study of theology. The animosity that often characterizes these debates arises from precisely the questions raised earlier in regard to the possibility of conducting value-free (read “scientific”) research on religious phenomena. In the context of the discipline of religious studies, advocates of a value-neutral study of religion, like McCutcheon, argue that theology and theologians are too overtly normative in their concerns.⁴⁹ There is no small amount of irony in attempts by scholars within religious studies to meet supposedly scientific standards of inquiry in their efforts to reform the discipline, while at the same time a broad range of scholars from political theory and literary studies, for example, are turning to the productive possibilities of political theology. The emergence of a substantial literature in political theology is only partially indebted to the revival of interest in the work of Carl Schmitt. The translation of Giorgio

Agamben's corpus into English, along with the widening influence of the philosophico-theological work of Hent de Vries (see his contribution, chapter 5) and the prolific Slavoj Žižek have proved to be fountainheads for the new discourse on political theology.⁵⁰

Among the dominant social scientific disciplines, research on religion is a thriving specialty in history departments and is well established if somewhat marginal within sociology. Whether it has maintained its centrality in anthropology in recent years is open to debate. Despite the increasing interest in questions of Islam in the field, research on religion has only a weak toehold in political science.

Disciplinary differences extend further, to the matter of *what* exactly is studied when religion is the object of examination. Political scientists are interested chiefly in the impact of religion on the struggle for the acquisition of power. An influential outlier of sorts is in the subfield of political theory and political philosophy, in which the work of Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Bonnie Honig, and William Connolly, among others, has long focused on religion.⁵¹ Sociologists concentrate on the following: varying rates of participation in religious practices, rituals, and institutions; the interrelationships among religious beliefs and other kinds of behavior; the nature and aims of religiously inspired movements; and the place of religion in public life. Anthropologists, relying principally on ethnographic methods, tend to be more attuned to the peculiarities and meanings of religious experience in specific settings, cultural formations, and traditions. Historians have worked on almost all of the issues addressed above but are perhaps particularly invested—as befits their *métier*—in questions concerning the origins and declines of various religious movements and practices.

Against this background, it is not hard to diagnose a certain balkanization of the study of religion that divides up the object of study in ways that reproduce the fault lines among the different fields themselves. (A notable exception: determinations about these methodological and disciplinary foci begin to break down somewhat when turning to the serious consideration of the importance of gender and hierarchy in analyzing religious life.) This fragmentation and marginalization helps to reinforce the notion that religion is a relatively insubstantial part of scholarly life. Meanwhile, interdisciplinary studies are often merely “multidisciplinary” rather than truly syncretic and synthetic. This is a problem, however, not just in the study of religion but in interdisciplinary scholarship generally; the problem of overcoming

“multidisciplinarity” in the study of religion is the problem of overcoming disciplinary boundaries in general. Yet it should also be said that “interdisciplinarity” often simply serves as an excuse for a lack of rigor.

At the same time, there seems to be a reorientation of disciplines afoot, whereby sociological forms of thinking are popping up in a variety of neighboring disciplines. So, however, are more utilitarian, or economic, forms of thinking, particularly in the methodologically individualistic, rational-choice mode. Political science has become wildly smitten by this mode over the past two decades. Will these developments at the epistemological level result in greater coherence in the study of religion (or anything else)? Is interdisciplinary scholarship on religion—which, like the study of migration, seems to be interdisciplinary in nature—any more likely to be successful than that in other areas? Reflection on earlier patterns of scholarly attention to religion, as represented in this volume, will be indispensable in addressing these kinds of questions.

Prospects for the Social Scientific Study of Religion

Against the background of these considerations, this book points toward new directions in the social scientific study of religion by interrogating the concept of the post-secular. It does so on both historical and theoretical grounds. One major problem, clearly, is to make sense of the rhythms of past social scientific attention to religion. How, for example, did secularization theory come to be so dominant and unquestioned (until, say, the 1980s) that there seemed little need to spell it out in any great detail? This is an urgent question insofar as much of the world was not behaving according to its dictates, even as the theory was being articulated. While one can understand why European scholars might conclude that the theory helped them to account for their own situation, its relevance to the American scene has always been problematic at best. How did a theory that had so little to say to American conditions nonetheless become hegemonic in the United States? We are not the first to note that the idea of secularization has been as much “a program” as it has been an empirically observable reality. The problem is to determine when, where, and why that program came to be realized and how stable it is.

From a theoretical perspective, can we define “religion” in a Weberian “ideal-typical” manner that makes the phenomenon more amenable to social

scientific analysis? Some think that this would be misguided, taking away from religious phenomena their unavoidable historical and cultural specificity, and hence robbing us of an important pathway to understanding. Moreover, the barriers separating the religious from the secular are increasingly regarded as fluid, and the view that the two spheres are simply mutually constitutive seems to be on the ascent. But is it possible to study religion if one can't say what it is with some degree of consistency?

Next, the turn to discussion of the post-secular has raised the question of the place of religion in social science scholarship more generally. How much of social life can we understand if we exclude religion from our analyses? Is religion crucial to understanding major social change, or not? The Weberian project was pitched on the scale of "universal history" and intended to make sense of the ways in which religious worldviews facilitated or hampered certain historical developments. Because his ultimate concern was with explaining the rise of modern capitalism in Europe, Weber was unashamedly Eurocentric in his conception of this project. This approach now appears to cast other traditions in an unnecessarily unflattering, as well as inaccurate, light. A more decentered analysis of the ways in which religion may shape behavior is called for today, eschewing an implicit directionality of development. Was ascetic, sectarian Protestantism *really* the central reason that the West emerged from the pack in the early modern period, ultimately outstripping its competitors in dramatic fashion? Is Western religiosity playing that role again—perhaps elsewhere in the world?

Religion has proved remarkably hardy, despite many reports of its death. The present moment offers an unusual opportunity for rethinking the dominance of secular assumptions in the self-understanding of the social sciences and beyond. We have witnessed a number of turns in the academic disciplines in recent years—linguistic, cultural, institutional, historical—that have heralded substantial shifts in the ways in which many scholars have conceived of what they are doing. Taken together, the essays in this volume suggest that we may now be in the throes of a turn toward renewed engagement with religion as well. This volume addresses the most urgent and compelling questions concerning religion's place in the social sciences and beyond by way of a sustained and critical examination of the notion of the post-secular.

Notes

1. Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006); Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006):1–25; Jürgen Habermas and Eduardo Mendietta, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002). For a helpful overview of various uses of the term "post-secular," see John D. Boy, "What We Talk about When We Talk about the Post-secular," *The Immanent Frame*, March 15, 2011, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/03/15/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-the-postsecular/>.
2. That same question prompted an exploratory workshop at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in June 2007 on the status of religion in contemporary culture, society, and politics as well as in the work of the contemporary social sciences. A conference at Yale University exploring the post-secular followed a year after the initial SSRC workshop on religion and public life. This volume brings together revised versions of papers presented and discussed during these gatherings.
3. David Jacobson, *Rights Across Borders: Immigration and the Decline of Citizenship* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Damian Tambini, "Post-National Citizenship," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24 (2001): 195–217; Martin J. Matustik, *Postnational Identity: Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).
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5. Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center; Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 2.
6. Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center; Grand Rapids, MI:

- W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992); Emile F. Sahliyah, *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). For a historical account of this phenomenon, see Jonathan Israel, *The Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
7. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
 8. Richard Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).
 9. For an excellent overview of these developments, see Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, and Alex Skinner, *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
 10. Randall Collins, "Conflict Theory and the Advance of Macro-Historical Sociology," in G. Ritzer, ed., *Frontiers of Social Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 68–87.
 11. One need look no further in Habermas's corpus than to his *Theory of Communicative Action* (vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, and vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*), in which he gives an account of the fate of normative concerns in light of the effects of Weberian secularization theory (vol. 1) and the emergence of discourse ethics out of Durkheim's notion of "the linguistification of the sacred." See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984–1987).
 12. On arguments on the relative autonomy of the state, see Fred L. Block, *Revising State Theory: Essays in Politics and Postindustrialism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969); Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, ed. and trans. Timothy O'Hagan (London: NLB and Sheed & Ward, 1973). For discussions of the cultural turn, see Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, "The Strong Program in Cultural Theory: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics," in Jonathan H. Turner, ed., *Handbook of Sociological Theory (Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research)* (New York: Springer, 2001), 135–150. Victoria E. Bonnell, Lynn Avery Hunt, and Richard Biernacki, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Frank Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); George Steinmetz, *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca,

- NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Erik Olin Wright, *The Debate on Classes* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).
13. Terrence J. McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).
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 15. Mark Juergensmeyer, “Beyond Words and War: The Global Future of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 882–895.
 16. A good deal of this funding is already said to be drying up, however, threatening whatever gains may have been made in the scholarly understanding of religion and in the institutionalization of related academic research.
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 19. For an extended discussion of this problem, see Philip S. Gorski, “The Return of the Repressed: Religion and the Political Unconscious of Historical Sociology,” in Julia Adams et al., eds., *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 161–189.
 20. Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Gorski, “The Protestant Ethic and the Bureaucratic Revolution,” in Charles Camic, Philip Gorski, and David Trubek, eds., *Max Weber’s Economy and Society: A Critical Companion* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 167–296; Sigrun Kahl, “The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant Traditions Compared,” *European Journal of Sociology* 46 (2005): 91–126; Philip Manow, *Religion und Sozialstaat: Die konfessionellen Grundlagen europäischer Wohlfahrtsstaatsregime* (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 2008); Peter Stamatov, “Activist Religion, Empire, and the Emergence of Modern Long-Distance Advocacy Networks,” *American Sociological Review* 75

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21. Olivier Tschannen, *Les théories de la sécularisation* (Geneva: Droz, 1992).
 22. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Philip S. Gorski, “Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300–1700,” *American Sociological Review* 65 (2000): 138–167; R. S. Warner, “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1993): 1044–1093.
 23. Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Ray Wallis and Steve Bruce, “Secularization: The Orthodox Model,” in S. Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8–30. The “differentiation thesis,” by contrast, still enjoys broader acceptance.
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32. Catherine L. Albanese, *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists: Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, and Henry David Thoreau* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), and Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
33. Pierre Bourdieu et al., *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).
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