

# RELIGION AND COMPARATIVE POLITICS

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■ **Abstract** Although scholars tend to downplay the role of religion in political life, the vast majority of people in the world profess a strong allegiance to some spiritual faith. Secularization theory has long held that religion would become irrelevant, leading many comparative scholars to ignore this potentially significant variable. A recent resurgence in religious fundamentalism and “new religious politics” has led more scholars to consider religious actors as important. However, research in this area befalls many of the same problems inherent in earlier secularization theories. A new body of scholarship, known as the “religious economy” school, seeks to address these problems by developing theories built on solid microlevel foundations of human behavior. This line of research holds great promise for the study of religion in comparative politics.

## INTRODUCTION

God is dead. Or so thought Nietzsche. For nearly a century and a half, one of the most firmly held beliefs in the social sciences was that religion and religious organizations inevitably would fade from social (and perhaps even private) life. Modernization, in the form of scientific progress and bureaucratic specialization, would cleanse society of superstition and the need to rely on churches for social welfare. Yet despite such prognostications, the World Values Survey revealed that more than three quarters of the respondents in 43 countries continue to profess a belief in some supernatural deity, 63% consider themselves religious, and 70% claim to belong to a religious denomination (Inglehart et al 1998).<sup>1</sup>

Many empirical indicators suggest that religious belief and practice are as prevalent as in times past, if not more so (Finke & Stark 1992, Stark 1999). New religious groups are emerging far more quickly than secularization theorists would predict, and established faiths (e.g. Catholicism, Islam) continually demonstrate the ability

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<sup>1</sup>No page numbers are given for this book, as data are listed in tables. For references, see Tables V143, V151, and V166. The data come from national surveys administered between 1990 and 1993. These figures are all the more remarkable because they include communist (or formerly communist) countries where religious practice is curtailed severely if not outright illegal.

to win converts in many parts of the world. Even in communist and formerly communist countries, spiritual groups refuse to die and are making an impressive comeback after decades of government-sanctioned repression (Greeley 1994).

Unfortunately, most comparative political scientists (and political scientists generally) consider religion to be a peripheral subject matter, perhaps because most researchers in this field still cling subconsciously to the secularization thesis. This is a serious oversight for two reasons. First, given the degree to which religious beliefs and organizations are deeply ingrained in almost every nation, ignoring religion means overlooking a potentially important variable in explaining politics. Observers of the 1979 Iranian Revolution were taken by surprise by the mobilizing potential of Islam in a nation seemingly moving through rapid modernization (read secularization). Likewise, few expected the Catholic Church would be a key player in the demise of Polish communism. The electoral mobilization of Protestant minorities in Peru allowed Alberto Fujimori to win a surprise victory in the first round of balloting in 1992 and eventually become president. And in countries such as Algeria, India, the Philippines, and Yugoslavia, religious motivations overlay political conflicts with violent ramifications. Without doubt, religion continues to make its presence felt in the realm of politics across the globe.

The study of religion is also important for a second reason. The insights drawn from research on religious beliefs and organizations have a direct bearing on questions of major importance to comparative political scientists. The broad topics of collective action, institutional design and survival, and the connection between ideas and institutions come immediately to mind. Religious movements have shown a remarkable ability to mobilize collective action, including political protest (Stark & Bainbridge 1985:506–30, Smith 1996). The mere fact that Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism continue to attract adherents after several millennia speaks volumes about the mobilizing power of these ideational movements. All these spiritual traditions have served as a locus for political mobilization in recent decades, indicating that they are far from becoming politically or socially obsolete.

Lessons about institutional organization can be drawn as well. The Roman Catholic Church exists as the world's longest-standing hierarchical organization, far outlasting any secular governing institution. At times, the Church even served as a quasi-governing institution for Europe when secular governments were weak or in short supply (Ekelund et al 1996). What is even more amazing is that the Vatican commands the loyalty and obedience of hundreds of millions of geographically dispersed people without maintaining a standing army or police force. Understanding the mechanisms of this control and how such a governing hierarchy operates would be of intrinsic interest for political scientists. Yet, the literature on the rise and decline of states usually overlooks this interesting case. This may be because of its small size (although the Vatican claims over a third of the world's population as adherents) or because it is seen as the center of an ideational movement rather than a governing hierarchy. Granted, the Holy See does base its legitimacy more on theology than other governments base theirs on ideology. But this should be

taken as an unparalleled opportunity for political scientists to explore the nexus between ideas and institutions.

Although religion is still a marginal topic in comparative politics, the past two decades witnessed a renewed interest in the study of religion among a small but growing number of scholars. Fueled by the “explosive” and surprising growth of fundamentalist movements in the some of the world’s largest faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—this revived interest comes with a downside, however. As with most academic fads concerning dramatic, global phenomena, research on religious fundamentalism tends to produce studies emphasizing “big” processes with very little microlevel foundational basis. The broad concepts employed (e.g. globalization, modernization) present problems in developing testable hypotheses. Nonetheless, this problem is easily rectified. Several political scientists, sociologists, and even economists are recasting the study of religion and politics in ways that will benefit the study of politics as a whole. What is surprising is that much of this work roots itself in rational choice theory (Warner 1993), a school of thought seemingly incapable of dealing with the “irrational” world of spirituality. The “religious economy school,” as it is known, helps provide the microlevel foundations for building a general theoretical understanding of religion. Marrying this approach to the ideational work that has been done on religion offers the exciting possibility of understanding how ideas and institutions interact on a regular basis.

This chapter surveys recent work in both the sociology of religion and the subfield of religion and comparative politics with the intent of showing political scientists that the study of religion is a worthwhile pursuit. This is not to say that all researchers must include religious variables in their analyses. Instead, I merely want to shed light on the general theoretical and empirical findings that scholars studying religion can bring to comparative politics at large. I begin by examining the secularization thesis and its general weakness as an explanatory framework. The intent here is to expose a number of widely held misconceptions about religion’s role in society and politics. I then examine ideational explanations for the recent resurgence in fundamentalism and new religiopolitical movements. It is ironic that many of the hypotheses used to explain the resurgence of religion rely on the exact same variables used to explain the supposed decline of religion. Finally, I introduce the “religious economy” school as a corrective (albeit incomplete) for the flaws of earlier research. Although most rational choice theorizing about religion has been done by sociologists and economists, a small group of political scientists are building upon their research to construct what could be called a political economy of religion.

## SECULARIZATION AND ITS CRITICS

If there ever were an award for the most durable, yet outdated, theoretical perspective in the social sciences, secularization theory would be the winner, or at least a close runner-up. The notion that religion would eventually become an

irrelevant player in both social and private life dates back to the nineteenth century. Despite strong empirical evidence to the contrary (cf Stark & Bainbridge 1985), and notwithstanding the reconsideration among sociologists of religion (Warner 1993), this view persists among many political scientists. In order to understand why the secularization thesis has had such a strong hold on social scientists, it is worthwhile to first understand what religion is before examining explanations for its alleged obsolescence (and resurgence).

## Defining Religion

Defining religion is a slippery enterprise. Given the broad panoply of what are often seen as religious movements—from Judaism to yoga, Buddhism to UFO cults—a single definition that encompasses all these entities has yet to be devised (Hamilton 1995:1–21). Nevertheless, the most commonly assumed definition is summarized by Smith (1996:5): “religion is a system of beliefs and practices oriented toward the sacred or supernatural, through which the life experiences of groups of people are given meaning and direction.” In an often-confusing world, religions are belief systems that provide ordered meaning and prescribe actions. The supernatural component is key to the definition, as it allows us to differentiate religions from secular ideologies, although it presents a problem in classifying something like Confucianism. This definition, however, does cover the “big three” Western faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and the bulk of Eastern religions (e.g. Hinduism, Taoism, and most variants of Buddhism). As such, this definition encompasses the spiritual beliefs and practices of the vast majority of the world’s population.

Religion frequently takes on an institutional form. (For rhetorical simplicity, the institutionalized form of religion can be called a “church,” although this is a mostly Christian term.) Almost all religious traditions have some form of rules dictating who is a member of the spiritual community and which members can make official pronouncements regarding doctrinal content. Thus, religion involves authoritative relationships. Recognizing this fact is an essential part of the broader definition of religion, specifically as it pertains to the study of politics; it raises the issue of church-state relations. Persons in authority generally seek the means of preserving their power. For religious authority, this may often mean reaching out for the assistance of the state, as religious groups typically lack the backing of coercive power. Overlapping authority between state and religious leaders may also cause conflict (e.g. on matters of obligatory military service). Religious leaders may use their institutional position to challenge unpopular governments as a means of preserving their authority or credibility among parishioners. In essence, by acknowledging that religion commonly takes on institutional forms, the role of interests becomes as critical to the analysis of religion and politics as are beliefs and values. I return to this important point below. For now, suffice it to say that identifying both the ideational and institutional aspects of religion is important to understanding secularization and its consequences for politics.

## Modernization, Secularization, and Politics

The concept of secularization is a simple notion premised on the prediction that the all-encompassing process of modernization will replace religion. Lechner (1991:1104), an ardent defender of the secularization thesis, states,

[I]n certain societies transcendentally anchored worldviews and institutions lose social and cultural influence as a result of the dynamics of rationalization (the process in which various social spheres come to operate according to their own standards). . . . Rationalization produces a pattern of cultural pluralization, social differentiation, and organizational specialization in societies with originally influential, if not dominant, religious cultures and institutions, such as Western societies prior to the Great Transformation. . . . Specifically, where official churches used to control substantial economic resources, the relative wealth and capital of these churches has declined; where authority was once legitimated mainly in religious terms and major political conflicts crucially involved religious motives, bureaucratized states now exercise rational-legal authority and separate civil and ecclesiastical spheres; where full membership in the societal community used to depend on one's religious identity and religiously motivated exclusiveness was common, inclusion on the basis of citizenship has transformed the meaning of membership.

Three interrelated trends occur as modernity washes away religion, affecting both ideas and institutions. First, a greater reliance on scientific explanation to understand life erodes the supernatural explanations needed in the past. Hence, we would expect that steady progress of science would be correlated with a decline in religious belief among the population, and the most scientifically sophisticated countries should be the least religious. Second, as the population loses faith in spiritual explanations, the institutions (churches) championing such explanations lose their social clout. It is ironic that the schismatic nature of Christianity reinforces this trend. As more distinct denominations arise claiming to have the ultimate truth, and because there can be only one ultimate truth, people begin doubting the veracity of all religions (Berger 1967).<sup>2</sup>

Religious pluralism thus destroys religion itself. Over time, then, religious organizations and their leaders should be in gradual retreat from the public square. This tendency reinforces the first trend; without public exposure to religious institutions, individual religiosity declines. Finally, religious groups find themselves becoming irrelevant socially because increasingly bureaucratized states take over the many welfare functions that churches performed in the past (e.g. assistance to the poor). All three of these trends supposedly proceed in unilinear fashion, with no reversal.

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<sup>2</sup>To be fair, Berger (1997) has since recanted his position, though his earlier work stands as one of the hallmarks of secularization theory.

Politically, secularization theory has two important predicted consequences. First, religious values and beliefs should play a decreasing role in political decision making and should serve less as a basis for mobilizing collective action today than in the past. Many of the new social movements that arise will be more secular in nature (cf Inglehart 1990). Social movements should have little in the way of spiritual content, and religious leaders should not be prominent among such movements. Religious cleavages in electoral politics should also disappear. Second, at the institutional level, secularization predicates the eventual separation of church and state. As the state takes over the social welfare functions of churches, little reason remains to support churches with public funds or official policy. This is not to say that church-state separation will be a smooth process, free of conflict. In fact, state leaders may very well go on the offensive against religious organizations because “government competes with religious ritual by introducing ritual of its own” (Wallace 1966:261). Thus, the secularization process will at times appear as a pitched battle between forces of progress and those longing for a more traditional time. This insight, as we see below, will prove critical in explaining anomalies in the secularization thesis.

## Secularization Reconsidered

Although secularization theory was being critiqued as far back as the 1960s (see Martin 1965), political events in the late 1970s and 1980s brought the paradigm crashing down. In 1979, Islamic clerics overthrew a supposedly modernized Iranian regime with widespread popular support. That same year saw Catholics, rallying around a new “liberation theology,” toss a Nicaraguan dictator from power. Nascent revolutionary groups across Latin America began courting progressive Catholics for their movements. Conservative evangelicals in the United States founded the Moral Majority and played an important role in the presidential election of Ronald Reagan. And clashes between Hindus and Muslims in India began having serious political overtones in the world’s most populous democracy. Secularization theorists predicted none of this. Once thought to be near extinction, religion came roaring back with a vengeance. It is not surprising that scholarship on spiritual movements and religion and politics witnessed a renaissance.

Although a number of scholars viewed the renewed political energy of religion as a backlash against the secularization/modernization process, thereby resuscitating what seemed to be an outdated theory (see below), others began arguing that secularization was never a good theory to begin with. Empirically, it did not fit the facts. Most survey evidence showed that various measures of religiosity in the United States and Europe were not trending downward but were essentially flat or increasing slightly (Hadden 1987, Greeley 1989, Stark & Iannaccone 1994). The United States—arguably the most modern country in the world—continues to show exceptionally high levels of religiosity compared with many other parts of the world. Moreover, “new” religious movements (e.g. Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses) are expanding at historically rapid rates around the world (Iannaccone

& Stark 1997, Stark 1996:4–21), even in Russia, where a secular state attempted to stamp out religious belief for over 70 years (Greeley 1994).

Finally, the theory of the long, gradual decline of religiosity presumes that some “golden age” of religiosity existed in the past from which to decline from. Even that contention is coming under considerable scrutiny now. Medieval Europe was rife with nonpious individuals, especially among the lower classes, who were not served by priests (Duffy 1987, Brooke & Brooke 1984). The myth that the British colonies in America spilled over with spirituality overlooks the fact that most settlers were drifters who had little connection to church, family, or community (Finke & Stark 1992). And even in Latin America, supposedly a bulwark of Catholicism for five centuries, attendance at Mass has always been abysmally low, largely because of a lack of priests to administer the sacraments (Poblete 1965). Although survey evidence is scant, most scholars do assume that people in all these situations—medieval Europe, the colonial United States, and Latin America throughout much of its history—believed in some supernatural deity or power. The real problem was that the institutional outreach of churches was weaker back then than it is today. Over time, the social penetration of churches has increased, not declined as secularization theorists would predict (Finke & Stark 1992). These findings should give pause to comparative political scientists. That religion influenced politics more in earlier eras should not be casually assumed (cf Juergensmeyer 1995:382). Too often, religion is used as a secondary means of explaining residuals in predicted models.

Although all the above observations chiseled away at the foundation of secularization theory, the wrecking ball was the sudden emergence of religious fundamentalism and its aggressive political agenda during the latter half of the twentieth century. The current research agenda in the area of religion and comparative politics is dominated by attempts to explain the origins of new religiopolitical movements.

## FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE NEW RELIGIOUS POLITICS

In 1991, the first of a massive four-volume set examining religious fundamentalism was published under the auspices of The Fundamentalism Project (Marty & Appleby 1991), reflecting a renewed interest in studying new religious movements in every part of the world. The third volume in the series was devoted entirely to looking at the political impact of such movements (Marty & Appleby 1993). Nonetheless, all four volumes directed attention to the political ramifications of religious fundamentalisms, as it appeared as if all the movements under observation were tightly connected to some “subversive” political action (Marty & Appleby 1991:ix). Indeed, the dominant feature of most new religious movements arising in the past 30 years has been their confrontational, and frequently conservative, stance against existing secular authorities. As such, these movements have also been referred to as religiopolitical groups, or as part of a “new religious

politics” (Keddie 1998). Islamic revolutionary groups bent on toppling secular rulers appeared with force in Iran, Egypt, and Algeria. Ultra-orthodox and messianic Jewish groups have frustrated attempts to broker peace agreements in Israel. The New Christian Right in the United States sought to overturn a variety of laws that they considered damaging to a moral lifestyle. The Bharatiya Janata Party and Vishwa Hindu Parishad movement in India reacted to the perceived excesses of pluralist democracy. Liberation theologians and Christian base communities in Latin America, unique among the subjects of comparative religious studies in being progressive, became vocal opponents of dictatorial regimes.<sup>3</sup>

Given that religion has long been viewed as a pillar of the status quo, these developments were all the more surprising to scholars.

## Origins of Fundamentalism

Explaining the origins of these new religiopolitical, fundamentalist movements dominates the literature on religion in comparative politics. Marty & Appleby (1991:22–23, emphasis in original) summarize the most widely accepted thesis related to this puzzle.

*Fundamentalisms arise or come to prominence in times of crisis, actual or perceived.* The sense of danger may be keyed to oppressive and threatening social, economic, or political conditions, but the ensuing crisis is perceived as a *crisis of identity* by those who fear extinction as a people or absorption into an overarching syncretistic culture to such a degree that their distinctiveness is undermined in the rush to homogeneity.

The exact nature of these crises is diverse (Keddie 1998), but the primary driving force behind all of them is a factor common to previous theories of religion—modernization. “Modernity tends to undermine the taken-for-granted certainties by which people lived through most of history. This is an uncomfortable state of affairs, for many an intolerable one, and religious movements that claim to give certainty have great appeal” (Berger 1999:11).

The causal linkage between modernization and fundamentalist revivals may be triggered by material conditions. As Davis (1991:784) explains,

[S]ociety and culture do not always develop in tandem. On the contrary, social and cultural differentiation may get “out of sync.” Take, for example, the social and existential suffering caused by rapid, unbalanced economic growth, or by catastrophic bouts of inflation or deflation. Society sometimes deals with such crises by deliberately imposing upon itself a simpler cultural system, represented in symbols harking back to earlier or more “primitive”

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<sup>3</sup>Religiously based civil rights activists in the 1960s could also be considered part of the new religious politics, given their activism against the status quo, but most studies of the “new religious politics” overlook this movement, as its goals were largely secular.

levels of development, or by values believed to be better or more authentic because they originated “in the beginning” . . . .

The adverse psychological impact of urbanization—which in turn is the result of industrialization and capitalization of agriculture—frequently appears as an explanation for the rise in religious fundamentalism (Martin 1990, Beyer 1994, Haynes 1998, Keddie 1998). Stated simply, material hardship prompts a general social anomie, prompting people to join new religious groups that promise to end the cause of those hardships.

Material conditions are not the only source of new religiopolitical groups. It is frequently argued that the modernization project not only is associated with increased economic progress but also contains important ideological and cultural components. The ideas emanating from Europe and the United States about what modernity should look like are coming under increasing fire by new religious movements.

Democracy and the political culture of pluralism, human rights, and liberal tolerance are basic products of cultural modernity. As early as the Renaissance, we find Machiavelli departing from the concept of divine order in establishing the idea that man can govern himself. The notion of government of the people by the people (that is, popular sovereignty) later served as a basis for the legitimacy of the secular nation-state, and some believe that scientific advancements have contributed to a global civilization that will unite all of humanity.

[R]eligious fundamentalists are challenging these assumptions. Modernity has fostered the idea of man/woman as an individual; fundamentalism is returning the individuals to the collectivity. . . . Thus, the organic bonding to a civilization, not the free will to be a participating member of a democratic body politic, is the alternative view of man presented by fundamentalism.

(Tibi 1998:24)

Secular nationalisms in the Third World, a political remnant of colonialism, are now being challenged by political actors with a vision of an alternate form of social governance—the “new religious state” (Juergensmeyer 1995, 1996).

It is interesting that the primary explanatory variable proposed to account for decreasing levels of religion in society is the same variable being posited for the increase in religious activism: modernization. This presents a theoretical conundrum. Where religion is said to be anemic or in decline (e.g. Europe), modernization is the culprit. Where religion is on the rise (e.g. in the United States or the Third World), again it is modernization at work. The same independent variable supposedly explains two diametrically opposed outcomes. Of course, this problem could be resolved by clearly specifying the mechanisms by which different aspects of modernization lead to different outcomes in different contexts. Keddie (1998) comes the closest to achieving this by arguing that where a strong religious tradition (“religiosity and communalism”) already exists and is shared by a widespread part of the population, the various manifestations of modernization will provoke the

creation of new religious movements. Secular nationalism is the alternative result “in countries where religiosity and communalism are weak” (Keddie 1998:723). Although this is a worthy attempt to untangle the thorny theoretical problem posed above, Keddie unfortunately does not operationalize her contextual variables to a degree sufficient for testing, although her general definitions leave open this possibility (1998:702).

Still, Keddie’s proposal is a clear advance over the vast majority of the literature on fundamentalist movements, which fails to move beyond broad generalizations that are difficult to test empirically. Operationalizing cultural mindsets is an inherently difficult task. Whether a cultural community reacts to modernization by secularizing or adopting religious fundamentalism can only be inferred by the presence of secularization or a fundamentalist revival. Theoretically, the dependent variable is linked to the definition of the independent variable and the argument becomes tautological. Moreover, there is a problem with the unit of analysis. Modernization supposedly affects entire cultures, or at least certain subcultures (e.g. urban migrants). Yet, there is scant evidence that entire cultures convert to new religiopolitical movements. In fact, casual observation suggests that active participants in religious fundamentalist movements represent only a small minority of the target population affected by the ills of modernization. What is missing from current theories of fundamentalism (at least within the political science literature) is a methodological emphasis on the individual. In other words, these theories lack solid microlevel foundations. Until these theoretical and methodological problems can be resolved, explanations of new religiopolitical movements will remain nonfalsifiable “grand theorizing” to the same extent that the secularization thesis was before.

## Politics of Fundamentalism

Regardless of the theoretical and methodological difficulties in explaining the origins of fundamentalism, scholars have now begun debating the political ramifications of new religiopolitical movements. Given the theoretical literature on the origins of fundamentalism, it should come as no surprise that political conflict is the most likely outcome of fundamentalist revival. Not only is the conflict posed in terms of church versus (secular) state, but it is also viewed as a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1996). Political battles in the post–Cold War world will be fought over two dramatically different conceptions of governmental organization—one based on the notion of popular sovereignty (democracy) and the other rooted in “divine right” (religious nationalism) (Juergensmeyer 1995). The conflict is inherently international, as the sovereign boundaries of these two worldviews do not coincide perfectly. Secular states, it is argued, construct ideologies (or “imagined communities”) based primarily on allegiance to geographical territory. The new religious movements view national membership as adherence to a set of doctrinal strictures.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>This is not true of doctrines that restrict membership based on ethnicity or other characteristics that would prohibit conversion into the group.

The criteria for membership and participation in these two realms often are incompatible, leading not only to civil war in religiously pluralistic nations but also to international conflict. As Tibi (1998:25–26) notes in discussing Islamic fundamentalism,

Democracies are secular nation-states based on popular sovereignty. This Western model has come to serve as a basis for the unity of humanity, despite manifold differences of religion and ethnicity. On the contrary, the idea of the “Government of God,” as a divine order. . . , which is presented by Islamic fundamentalists as a global alternative to the secular state, exacerbates the division of humanity into civilizations. Fundamentalist politics also tear at the populations of existing multireligious and multiethnic states. . . into gerrymandered agglomerations. . . . The sundering of the population of Bosnia-Herzegovina into three collectivities, each belonging to a distinct civilization, is another topical case in point. No prudent observer can preclude such a destiny for India or other such states, if fundamentalists continue to draw the fault lines of conflict that they have publicly announced. . . . The global character of religious fundamentalism heralds an age of disorder and open strife, on both the state level and the level of global international system.

Unlike traditional international wars that were pitched along geographic lines, the “inevitable” clash of civilizations will be fought in much less conventional ways, namely through terrorism (Juergensmeyer 2000).

At the heart of this argument is the notion that religion, and particularly religious fundamentalism, is incompatible with democratic governance (Kepel 1994). Democracy relies on the will of the people, which can be fickle and relativistic. Compromise and tolerance constitute essential values in functioning democracies. Religion, on the other hand, deals in absolute truths. When laws are given by the will of God, there can be no room for compromise. Tolerance for alternative views becomes akin to acceptance of heresy. Sprinzak (1993:484), in his discussion of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, observes that fundamentalism erodes the basis for democracy.

It is important to note that no democracy on earth is devoid of tensions, conflicts, corruption, and some degree of violence. But if the majority of the conflicting parties respect a certain set of democratic ideals and cultural tenets, these tensions do not become pathological and the system can cope. If, on the other hand, the conflicts evolve without an overall respect for these values, the system is in trouble. For a democracy to survive decently, it is not enough that all the partners to the regime formally respect its institutions. A respect for its values and a positive orientation toward its legal order are necessary. This is today the Achilles’ heel of Israel’s democracy and the problem with the new religious radicalism. Even those ultranationalists and fundamentalists who say they are committed to democracy in their own way

are a serious danger because their commitment is instrumental and their allegiance is conditional.

Taking into account the rapid global expansion of fundamentalist movements, Sprinzak's conclusion bodes ill for the prospect of consolidating the most recent wave of democracy.

Not all scholars share this pessimistic prognosis. First, it has been noted that fundamentalist movements and their political activism are not all that new. Messianic movements have come and gone for several millennia (Stark & Bainbridge 1985:506–30, Cohn 1961). Second, it has been argued that members of the most extreme fundamentalist groups are only a tiny minority of the faiths they represent. Although even small bands of fanatics can wreak havoc with the proper weapons, this hardly constitutes a global movement approaching a clash of civilizations. This argument has been applied largely to cases of Islamic fundamentalism, “shattering the myth” that all Muslims are extremists (Lawrence 1998). Both Robinson (1997) and Esposito & Voll (1996) argue that Islamic fundamentalism need not be incompatible with democracy and that the outcome hinges less on doctrine and metaphysical values than on strategic calculations of interests in various contexts. Likewise, Nasr (1995) discovered that effective participation in democratic governance tames the more extremist tendencies in Islamic fundamentalist movements. Gerges (1999) has found that in diplomatic circles, the “clash of civilizations” theory is not a guiding policy force, as most policy makers do not consider there to be an ongoing global culture war. Examining a slightly different problem related to potential culture clashes, Laitin (1986) demonstrated that religious traditions—even when potentially in conflict—need not be the most salient cleavage in politics.

Perhaps the most novel argument dealing with the political roles of religious extremists comes from Kalyvas (2000), who compared an Islamic fundamentalist movement in contemporary Algeria with a fundamentalist (ultramontanist) Catholic movement in nineteenth-century Belgium. Both movements were ideologically opposed to political liberalization, but whereas the Algerian case resulted in a breakdown of democracy via (secular) military coup in the face of Islamic militancy, the Catholic Church acquiesced in Belgium. The divergent outcomes were attributable not to theology (both groups were outwardly hostile toward democracy) but rather to institutional design. In both instances, it became apparent to several religious leaders that a fierce resistance to the democratization process would harm the long-term interests of their institutions. But whereas the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church allowed the Vatican to impose its will over extremist bishops and communicate a credible commitment to Belgian politicians, the decentralized nature of Islam made such a commitment impossible for moderate Algerian Muslims. What such scholars as Kalyvas, Robinson, Laitin, and Nasr introduce in their analysis that is missing in the majority of work on religious fundamentalism is attention to the microlevel foundational interests driving religious actors. Such attention to detail has been a major corrective to highly abstract discussions of religion employing diffuse concepts and theories that are difficult to operationalize and test.

## Beyond Fundamentalism: Ideational Models of Religious Politics

Not all research on the resurgence of religion and the “new religious politics” deals with conservative fundamentalist movements. The primary exception to this rule has been the case of liberation theology and progressive Catholicism in Latin America. Here is an example of a resurgent religious movement that does not look back to more traditional times in an effort to stave off the effects of secularization and modernization. Instead, while offering critiques of the modernization process, it has embraced a progressive outlook, incorporating many of the secular arguments that more conservative religiopolitical groups have attacked (e.g. secular socialism, Marxism, liberal democracy). In doing so, progressive Catholics became a champion for democracy in several parts of Latin America. The political battles waged by liberation theologians and their compatriots were less about clashing civilizations than about class conflict.

However, similar to the analyses of conservative religiopolitics, studies of progressive Catholicism have emphasized ideational factors in explaining how an institution that ardently supported the status quo in the past could change so rapidly. As Mainwaring (1986:7) argues, “the starting point for understanding the [Catholic] Church’s politics must be its conception of its mission. The way the Church intervenes in politics depends fundamentally on the way it perceives its religious mission.” Changes in the worldview of the international Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) are widely cited as the principal cause for Latin American Catholicism taking on a more activist political role (Sigmund 1990, Shepherd 1995). Although external socioeconomic factors (e.g. growing poverty) played a role in prompting this rethinking of the Church’s role, the principal variable explaining religious change was the rise of a new “insurgent consciousness” (Smith 1991).<sup>5</sup>

A recent conservative retrenchment within the Catholic Church, away from liberation theology and the more progressive policies of Vatican Council II, has been widely attributed to an ideological shift in Rome, which was then imposed on lower levels of the Church. And as progressive Catholicism has faded, the rise of evangelical Protestantism in the region has caught the attention of scholars (Martin 1990, Stoll 1990). Although Latin American Protestantism has not shown the political activism of other fundamentalisms around the world, its conservative nature has prompted numerous scholars to hypothesize that it, too, is a reaction to secularization and social anomie (cf Sexton 1978).

What these studies of progressive Catholicism share with the writings on more conservative fundamentalist groups is the emphasis on ideational factors in the realm of religion and politics. In many ways, this emphasis seems reasonable, given that religion is essentially about beliefs and values. Given that these ideas,

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<sup>5</sup>To their credit, both Smith (1991) and Mainwaring (1986) present nuanced ideational models that incorporate the role of institutions and other socioeconomic factors in a sophisticated manner.

beliefs, and values are what differentiate religions from most other social actors (save secular ideological movements), it makes sense to assume ideational factors would be at the center of any religious political action. However, an overemphasis on ideational variables risks ignoring the facts that almost all religions take on some strict institutional form and that these institutions impose certain interests and constraints on actors. Rounding out an analysis of religion and politics requires taking institutional and interest-based factors more seriously.

## RELIGIOUS ECONOMY: The Role of Interests and Institutions

Within the past two decades, a handful of sociologists and economists have been proposing controversial new theories to explain a variety of religious behavior. Their work has caused a major stir within the religious studies community (see Warner 1993) and is now beginning to influence the study of religion and politics. The work of these scholars is based on microeconomic (or rational choice) theories of human behavior, long thought to be an inappropriate lens for viewing religious behavior.<sup>6</sup>

Although the religious economy literature is not as focused on one central theme as the work on the issues of secularization or fundamentalism, its goal is to explain religion's historical resilience, i.e. to understand why strict religions tend to have the greatest success in expanding. In this regard, the religious economy school speaks directly to secularization theorists and scholars examining fundamentalism (as fundamentalists tend to have "strict" religions). The benefit of this new approach, however, is that it starts with a firm basis in microlevel analysis, beginning with individuals and working upward to larger social systems.

### Individuals, Institutions, and Markets

Contrary to what one might expect, recent economic theories of religion do not reduce religion to materialistic causes. The initial assumption is that religious people find some intrinsic value in believing in a religious creed, whether for peace of mind or for salvation (Stark 2000). Given that, the question becomes how consumers (parishioners) and producers (clerics) strive to satisfy their religious desires. Explanations proceed from the level of the individual consumer to the institutional level of producers (clerics and churches) and finally to the market (i.e. the interaction of various churches with each other and the government).

At the individual level, religious economy models begin with the assumption that people maximize benefits net of costs. When trying to obtain as much spiritual

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<sup>6</sup>Actually, the use of economics to study religion can be traced back to Adam Smith. However, most abridged versions of Smith's lengthy *Wealth of Nations* exclude his profound insights on religion.

satisfaction as they can, they allocate various resources (e.g. time, money) to religious activities. Building on Becker's (1964) theory of human capital, Iannaccone (1990) presents a unified model of religious capital that helps explain religious conversion, allocation of time versus financial resources in religious participation, and the effects of religious intermarriage. Although the findings of this specific study do not have a direct bearing on comparative political research, it does provide important indirect implications for politics. First, in pluralistic religious markets, denominational mobility (i.e. conversion to other faiths) is not uncommon, which suggests that religious tradition is not an immutable feature of culture. In other words, religious preferences can vary across a "culturally homogenous" population and no single religion will likely satisfy all people (see also Stark 1992). This helps provide a microlevel foundational basis for the question of governmental regulation of religion (see below). It is this attention to methodological individualism that provides the second important implication of Iannaccone's model. By starting his theoretical inquiries with individuals, Iannaccone is able to construct more complete theories of macrobehavior that are connected directly to individual action. In doing so, he avoids diffuse statements about higher levels of analysis (communities, cultures) common to the literature on secularization and fundamentalism, which typically start and end their political analysis at the level of society.

Iannaccone and his colleagues have extended the religious economy approach to help explain institutional behavior. Perhaps one of the most vexing questions facing the study of religion at this level of analysis is why strict religions grow so rapidly. Previous theories, including explanations within the fundamentalist literature, assume it is due to some mass psychological or cultural dislocation. Iannaccone (1992, 1994) argues instead that strict religions are able to overcome free-rider problems more effectively than "low-cost" religions. By imposing strict codes of behavior on adherents (e.g. dress codes, dietary restrictions), religious groups are able to dissuade free riders from joining the organization and diluting its resources. Moreover, because strict religions tend to dissuade participants from partaking in activities outside the religious organization, more time and monetary resources from those individuals can be directed to the group goal. In the end, although strict religions may cost members more, they end up providing more benefits per member. As such religious movements grow, however, it becomes more difficult to monitor and punish free-riding behavior, leading to a drain on organizational resources and a decline in growth rates (see also Stark & Bainbridge 1985, Finke & Stark 1992). Institutions that are able to promote continual strictness tend to be the most effective and enduring religions in history. These findings are instructive for theories of political and social movements and add to the already burgeoning literature on collective-action problems (cf Lichbach 1995).

Finally, of perhaps greatest relevance to comparative politics, the religious economy school has introduced new explanations for the vitality (or anemia) of religion at the society level. Noting that religious preferences tend to be pluralistic

in society, the theory holds that no single denomination can adequately supply the entire demand for religious goods (answers to questions about salvation, etc). Societies that allow religious pluralism to flourish tend to see high levels of religiosity in terms of both belief and practice (Iannaccone 1991). Although Islamic countries seem to be the exception to this rule (religious monopolization and vitality coexisting), the unique decentralized structure of this religion provides incentives for maintaining evangelical vigor. In Islam, each cleric (*alim*) is responsible for his own income via the contributions he can gather from followers. No overarching authority provides salaries (except in institutions of higher learning). Thus, keeping oneself well fed means aggressively attracting paying believers, thus promoting religious vitality. This incentive structure is similar to those of many Pentecostal churches in the United States and Latin America.

Given that religious goods are easy to produce and, thus, production has low barriers to entry (Gill 1999a), the only means of enforcing a religious monopoly is by government fiat (Stark 1992). In effect, secularization is not an effect of culture or the battle of ideas as much as it is a function of government regulation of the religious market. Where government restrictions on religion impose high costs on consumers and producers, religious activity diminishes. Stark & Iannaccone (1994) have demonstrated that Europe is highly secular not because of its Enlightenment culture but because religion is highly regulated in these economies, often favoring one or two specific denominations (see also Chaves & Cann 1992, Monsma & Soper 1997). Governments that have deregulated religion—i.e. increased the level of religious liberty—have seen increases in religious participation (Finke 1990, Finke & Iannaccone 1993, Gill 2000a), contrary to the predictions of secularization theory (Berger 1967).

Realizing that government regulation can have a dramatic effect on the overall level of religiosity in society opens the door to a new realm of church-state studies. Rather than seeing the separation of church and state as a natural process of secularization and modernization (Casanova 1994:40, Helmstadter 1997:7), one must pay careful attention to the political negotiations surrounding a broad array of regulatory laws affecting religion (Gill 1999b, 2000b). Zoning regulations, levels of taxation, media restrictions, and government subsidies all impose differential costs on religious evangelization. This calls, then, for a political economy of religion, which incorporates the interests of political actors into the study of religious markets. To date, the religious economy school has noted the importance of government regulation in determining religious market outcomes, but scholars have yet to explain the variation in levels of religious regulation across nations. Based on the economic concept of opportunity costs, Gill (2000b) is attempting to construct such a theory, taking into account the interests politicians have in maintaining power. He argues that the form of religious regulation in a nation is a function of the relative bargaining power of religious and political actors. Religious liberty is enhanced under conditions of growing *de facto* religious pluralism coinciding with increased political competition.

## Interest-Based Theories of Religion and Politics

In the past decade, comparative political scientists have begun to realize the benefits of examining religion from an interest-based and institutional perspective. The empirical agenda of this research is less cohesive than either the secularization and fundamentalist literatures, given that scholars in this developing tradition prefer to focus on specific historical questions rather than broad global phenomena. Nonetheless, the theoretical methods they use are helping to introduce the importance of incorporating microlevel analysis into the study of religion and comparative politics.

Kalyvas (1996) was among the first to champion this approach in comparative politics. He sets out to explain why Christian Democratic parties arose in Europe against the desires of the Catholic Church and proclerical Conservative parties during the nineteenth century. The answer lies in the unintended consequences of pursuing short-term institutional interests. In an effort to combat liberal attempts at restricting Church prerogatives, bishops in several countries promoted the development of lay organizations to rally Catholic support. However, once these organizations were formed, they began competing with the Church itself to represent Catholics in the political arena. Moreover, in order to win political office, they downplayed “the salience of religion in politics to appeal to broader categories of voters and strike alliances with other political forces” (Kalyvas 1996:18), precisely the outcome Church leaders wanted to avoid. Recently, Gould (1999) has extended Kalyvas’ analysis to explain how liberal politicians were able to overcome stiff religious opposition to the policies of economic, political, and religious liberalization. It is ironic that defeating religious opponents meant coopting clergy (particularly Protestant ministers) by enhancing their religious authority. Liberals also found it strategically wise to rally a peasant base around religious issues, thereby providing an electoral buffer against any possible clerical attacks.

In the same vein as the other two studies, Warner (2000) looks at the relationship between the Catholic Church and political parties in post–World War II Europe. Modeling the Church as an interest group seeking to reassert its institutional prominence in society, she explains how relations with previous wartime governments imposed constraints on the postwar political strategies of the Catholic bishops. In doing so, Warner applies economic research on credible commitments and asset specificity to show how decisions concerning political alliances early on reduce the ability to switch allies in the future, depending on the institutional makeup of the Church and party structure. In Italy, the Church distanced itself from the fascist regime and was able to credibly commit to a partnership with the Christian Democrats. However, once this alliance was forged, it was difficult for bishops to back away. The French Church’s connection with the Vichy government severely limited the political options available to bishops in the Fourth Republic and thus became only a weak ally to the French Popular Republican Movement. However, this gave French bishops greater bargaining leverage in their ability to threaten

to withdraw votes, although the highly decentralized nature of the French Church limited this threat.

Although Kalyvas, Gould, and Warner each examine different questions and choose different cases, these three studies are an important step forward in detailing how institutional religious interests influence politics. Prior to this, most work on religion and politics in Europe considered only the theological and moral roles of religious actors.

In a different part of the world, Gill (1998) contributes to this interest-based analysis of religion by developing an economic model for religious opposition in Latin America. Asking why only some national Catholic episcopacies opposed authoritarian dictators during the 1970s while others remained neutral or supportive, Gill found previous ideational explanations to be inadequate. Explaining opposition as a shift in episcopal preferences for the poor served only to redefine the question rather than explain why the shift came about in the first place. He argues that the nature of the religious market—either monopolistic or competitive—had a major impact in shifting the Church's pastoral, and ultimately political, strategy. Positing that religious groups attempt to maximize market share, national Catholic Churches that were guaranteed a monopoly position by government fiat were able to retain alliances with unpopular dictators. But where Protestant competitors made inroads among the poor, bishops were forced to take a preferential option for the poor. Making a credible commitment to the poor (following centuries of neglect) meant vocally opposing right-wing dictators. Like the three aforementioned studies on Europe, this work considers institutional interests an important factor in determining how religious actors behave.

Perhaps the most innovative and interesting argument for adopting a neo-institutionalist approach to religion comes from a group of five economists. In a series of articles collected in one book (Ekelund et al 1996), these scholars analyze the behavior of the medieval Catholic Church as if it were an economic firm. Their work is expansive in scope. They address how the Church organized itself to maintain market share and collect revenue in an environment where monitoring and enforcement capabilities were weak. The Church's doctrine on usury is also examined to show how the Church "shadow priced" loans so as to maximize rent. And the secrecy behind confessions and the sale of indulgences is seen as a way of taxing a population with varying price elasticities for salvation; those who feared hell were charged more than those who had less to dread. If the shroud of secrecy surrounding the price of indulgences had been broken, those with highly inelastic demand for salvation would have bid down their prices. Perhaps their most interesting claim counters Weber's famous "Protestant ethic" thesis. Instead of the Church hindering European economic development, it actually enhanced it. The Church's desire to enhance its monopoly power and extract revenue efficiently meant that it created the basic financial and governing infrastructure needed for investors to feel secure. This fascinating work is a must-read for any political scientist interested in the question of state formation.

The religious economy school provides an important corrective to models of religious behavior that rely solely on ideational variables. This is not to say that ideas are unimportant. However, institutional concerns often trump theological prescripts in many political situations. Moreover, starting analysis with the individual helps to provide a needed dose of microlevel analysis to a field of inquiry dominated by metaphysical theorizing. Nonetheless, the economic school ignores the importance of how culture can affect the preferences of actors. Building theories that integrate interests with ideas is the next frontier in the study of religion and politics.

## CONCLUSION

World events make it increasingly clear that religion is, and will continue to be, a major player in politics. The serious study of religion and politics is relatively new because the dominant thinking in sociology and political science has long considered religion increasingly irrelevant in social life. As with the discovery of most major global trends (e.g. economic globalization, democratization), the initial stages of research on the role of religion and politics has relied on ill-defined concepts and grand theorizing. This has been typical of the literature on fundamentalism. However, as the research agenda has matured, a greater sensitivity to methodological rigor has become the norm. Scholars are now developing the microlevel foundations that will make it possible to test empirically a variety of hypotheses related to religious political behavior. Given the unique organizational features of religious movements and the central role that theology plays, the investigation of this topic promises to yield substantial benefits to political science.

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