coming up in Dædalus:

on science  
Alan Lightman, Gerald Holton, Albert Einstein, Susan Haack, David Pingree, Peter Pesic, Peter Wolynes, and Robert Schimke

on learning  
Alison Gopnik, Howard Gardner, Jerome Bruner, Susan Carey, Elizabeth Spelke, Patricia Churchland, Daniel Povinelli, Clark Glymour, and Michael Tomasello

on happiness  

on progress  
Joseph Stiglitz, John Gray, Charles Larmore, Randall Kennedy, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Jagdish Bhagwati, Richard A. Shweder, and others

on human nature  

on race  
Kenneth Prewitt, Orlando Patterson, George Fredrickson, Ian Hacking, Jennifer Hochschild, Glenn Loury, David Hollinger, Victoria Hattam, and others

plus poetry by Les Murray &c.; fiction by Joanna Scott &c.; and notes by Perez Zagorin, Richard Stern, Gerald Early, Rita Colwell, Daniel Schorr, Jennifer Hochschild, S. George H. Philander, Shelley Taylor, Philip L. Quinn &c.

U.S. $13/Canada $16  
www.amacad.org
Comment by Robert Post

Congress & the Court

The United States in recent years has been drifting toward an important confrontation over constitutional limits on the power of the federal government. Three years ago, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia took the extraordinary step of publicly accusing Congress of “increasingly abdicating its independent responsibility to be sure that it is being faithful to the Constitution.”1 More recently, New York Senator Hillary Clinton has sharply warned against “the imperial tendencies of the current Court.”2 Amid the charges and countercharges, one thing is clear: In a series of landmark decisions over the past decade, the Rehnquist Court has overturned understandings of constitutional structure that have been in place since the New Deal.3

The looming crisis is formidable, even by the standards of a relationship that is historically fraught with controversy. The framers of the U.S. Constitution, fearful that the “encroaching nature” of political power would overwhelm merely “parchment barriers,” deliberately separated the new federal government into three distinct branches, “so contriving the interior structure of the government as that its several constituent parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places.” With exquisite practicality, the framers sought to make “ambition...counteract ambition,” thereby “supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives.”4 Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court were thus designed to face each other at arm’s length, with the abiding suspicion that the opposite branch might potentially overreach its rightful bounds.

This tension has waxed and waned, but the controversy now building be-

1 Justice Antonin Scalia, quoted in the editorial “A Shot from Justice Scalia,” The Washington Post, 2 May 2000, A22. Scalia added, “My court is fond of saying that acts of Congress come to the court with the presumption of constitutionality. But if Congress is going to take the attitude that it will do anything it can get away with and let the Supreme Court worry about the Constitution...then perhaps that presumption is unwarranted.” See also Robert Stacy McCain, “Scalia Disses Congress,” The Washington Times, 19 April 2000, A6; and Tony Mauro, “Court Declares Constitutional War on Congress,” The Legal Intelligencer, 22 May 2000, 5.


3 See John T. Noonan, Jr., Narrowing the Nation’s Power: The Supreme Court Sides with the States (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

4 The Federalist Papers, Nos. 48 and 51.
tween Congress and the Court threatens to reach historic proportions. Until the 1930s, the premise of American civics was that the federal government in Washington, D.C., was to have only limited powers; it was confined to the specific forms of authority granted it in the Constitution. State governments, by contrast, were considered plenary; they had all powers except those that had been taken away by the Constitution. How to ascertain the proper balance of power between the federal government and the states was understood to constitute “the cardinal question of our constitutional system.”

The U.S. Supreme Court would from time to time seek to answer that question by articulating the constitutional limits of congressional power. For example, in 1918 it decided that the Congress had exceeded the bounds of proper national authority when it sought to regulate child labor within the states.

The Great Depression destroyed this vision of constitutional structure. In the crucible of that crisis the Court and the country reinterpreted the Constitution to authorize the national government to legislate as necessary to meet national needs. The Court accordingly redefined its function: Instead of policing the limits of federal authority, it would seek to ensure that the exercise of national power did not violate individual constitutional rights. Congress consequently emerged from the Great Depression and from World War II essentially unbound by the old constraints of federalism. Generations of Americans have since grown up assuming that national power is effectively plenary. For many years, the students to whom I taught constitutional law regarded as merely quaint absurdities earlier Supreme Court decisions that had applied principles of federalism to limit national authority.

All this changed dramatically in 1995 when five justices appointed by Republican presidents elected on platforms dedicated to resurrecting the values of federalism joined together to decide what for the previous fifty years had been almost inconceivable – that a congressional statute was invalid because it exceeded the limits of national authority transferred to Congress by the Constitution.

These same five justices have now coalesced into a solid voting bloc that has embarked upon the remarkable task of circumscribing federal power in the name of federalism. The result has been fairly characterized as a constitutional revolution.

It is of course serious business to hold that our national legislature cannot enact such legislation as is deemed necessary to meet national needs. The Court’s


new decisions may not be dismissed simply as conservative disapproval of past liberal legislation, for the Court has struck down many statutes, like the Religious Freedom Restoration Act\textsuperscript{9} and the Patent and Plant Variety Protection Remedy Clarification Act,\textsuperscript{10} that were enacted with virtually unanimous support. What is most fundamentally at issue in the Court’s recent opinions is the structure of the constitutional relationship that will obtain between the Court and Congress.

These opinions have created real confusion about exactly what the Court wishes Congress to do in order to validate the constitutionality of federal statutes. Some language in the Court’s opinions seems to point to the need for more detailed congressional fact-finding; other language seems to point toward a categorical and judicially enforced “distinction between what is truly national and what is truly local.”\textsuperscript{11} It is not clear what leeway the Court will grant Congress to interpret and enforce constitutional rights.\textsuperscript{12}

In the complex structure of checks and balances created by the framers, judicial review is an important means by which the Court can limit an overreaching Congress. But the force of judicial review is countered by the constitutional mechanisms given to Congress to restrain judicial excess. There are numerous such mechanisms, which range from determining the scope and nature of judicial jurisdiction to the setting of judicial salaries. By far the most important avenue of congressional influence is the confirmation process. Because the Senate must approve the appointment of all Article III federal judges, it can ultimately control the complexion of the federal judiciary.

Confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justices have always carried the potential to turn highly contentious. But political discord has sharply accelerated in the years since the Senate’s rejection of President Reagan’s nomination of Robert Bork in 1987. Each nomination to the Supreme Court is now an impending bomb waiting to explode in the Senate Chamber. Senators are divided about the nature of the confirmation process. There is profound disagreement about the questions that can appropriately be posed to a nominee and about the criteria of judgment that ought to be applied in deciding whether or not to confirm a candidate. These sharp divisions are now affecting the confirmation hearings of lower federal judges, most especially of nominees to the U.S. Courts of Appeals. This is an entirely new historical phenomenon.

Although there are means by which the Court can check Congress and means by which Congress can check the Court, in most circumstances the federal government works best when Congress and the Court pull together, cooperating in the smooth and efficient articulation and enforcement of federal law. The idea is that Congress enacts legislation, which is then seamlessly interpreted and


\textsuperscript{10} See Florida Prepaid Postsecondary Education Expense Board v. College Savings Bank, 527 US 627 (1999). The Court has also struck down Title I of the nearly unanimous Americans with Disabilities Act as beyond the power of Congress under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment, which in effect means that Congress cannot authorize its enforcement by private damage actions against the states. See Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama v. Garrett, 531 US 356 (2001).


applied by the judiciary. The orderly operation of the federal government depends upon this continuous and quotidian cooperation.

Even here, however, the relationship between Congress and the Court is in disarray. Vigorous disputes have arisen among the justices about how exactly they should go about the process of construing and applying federal legislation. Some justices contend that courts ought never to review legislative history when seeking to interpret statutes, whereas others deliberately look to all available forms of information that might help a court understand the meaning of legislation. It has become unclear, therefore, what, in addition to the actual text of a statute, will count as authoritative indicia of legislative intent and meaning. The smooth cooperation of Court and Congress is correspondingly undermined.

These are unsettling developments to anyone who cares about the effective operation of the federal government. As a nonpartisan witness of recent developments, with a strong independent interest in promoting principles of good governance, the American Academy is using its good offices to facilitate a constructive dialogue to reach across the chasm now separating Congress from the federal courts. It has launched a project to identify and study the current tensions between the Court and Congress, with an eye to ameliorating whatever tensions disinterested scholarship might properly address. The steering committee of the project consists of Jesse Choper, Linda Greenhouse, Abner Mikva, Nelson W. Polsby, and Robert Post, together with Leslie Berlowitz and Alexandra Oleson. There is in addition an advisory committee that consists of members of the Court and Congress.

The project is currently pursuing two initiatives. The first is to host a series of private, off-the-record conversations between members of the federal judiciary and members of Congress. These meetings promote mutual understanding and permit a broad range of issues involving the ongoing relationship between Congress and the federal courts to be ventilated and examined. Constructive solutions to particular problems can be proposed and vetted; cooperation can be encouraged. The second initiative involves bringing the disinterested expertise of the American Academy to bear on issues that currently divide Congress and the federal judiciary. To the extent that these issues might be clarified by the exercise of such expertise, the American Academy can assemble an interdisciplinary team of scholars whose work would be valuable to both sides.

One area of investigation has already been identified. The American Academy is working to assemble a group of scholars to investigate the subject of statutory interpretation. The study will select a sample of judicial decisions that involve controversial questions of statutory interpretation and will compare how the relevant legislation was actually enacted, on the one hand, with how it was interpreted by the courts, on the other. By closely examining these cases, the study will assess the empirical plausibility of the premises of the various theories of statutory interpretation now in play. The study will also examine how the procedures of Congress, and the working processes of the federal courts, have changed in the past decades in ways that might affect the task of statutory interpretation.

The question put to religion by the secular Enlightenment in its Freudian and Marxist manifestations is asked in a different way in the age of terrorism. The old question was, *How can otherwise sensible people, in affirming God as a source of meaning, manifest such infantilism?* Now the question has become, *How can people committed to the democratic ideal embrace a belief system that underwrites intolerance and even violence?*

To be religious, in the view of many who are not, involves a form of psychological immaturity. But more troubling is the suspicion that religion itself is a fundamental source of radical discord—a suspicion that has its origin in the European wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but which has been broadly renewed since the 9-11 savage-ries were enacted in the name of Allah.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the suicide-murderers of Al Qaeda (and of Hezbollah, for that matter) are not the only ones to justify violent absolutism by appeals to the divine. America’s War on Terrorism is itself defined by a fervent Manichaeanism that divides the world between good and evil. “God bless America,” a formerly innocuous patriotic piety, has taken on the character of a truth-claim, an open assertion of the long-dormant exceptionalism that assumes a national anointing—a sacred destiny that elevates America above other nations. A religious self-understanding informs our nation’s new imperial impulse, explicitly articulated in the Bush administration’s 2002 “National Security Strategy.”

The result is a drastic reordering of American relations not only with an Islamic adversary that is perceived univocally (Iraq is ‘evil,’ and so is Iraq’s mortal enemy Iran), but also with an openly skeptical Europe, and an increasingly alienated Asia.

Meanwhile, Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan find religious justifications in their otherwise dissimilar traditions for apocalyptic brinkmanship—as if deities could will Armageddon after all. Many Muslim preachers, and not only in the Arab world, have resuscitated the ancient slanders of anti-Semitism—and even its modern corollary, which is the murder of Jews for being Jews. A similarly anti-Jewish structure of mind

---

*James Carroll, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1998, is a novelist, a columnist, and the author of “Towards a New Catholic Church” and “Constantine’s Sword,” among other nonfiction works. Ordained as a Catholic priest in 1969, Carroll served as a chaplain at Boston University before leaving the priesthood to become a writer.*
(old versus new; law versus grace; form versus substance) is rooted in supercessionist Christian theology – and while its effects have been widely repudiated by the churches, that theology itself remains more or less intact. At the same time, self-consciously religious, ultra-nationalist Jews, invoking God’s will as revealed in sacred texts, have staked claims to disputed land on the West Bank and in Gaza – land which is now valued above human life. A form of expansive Jewish sectarianism denigrates the lives not only of Palestinians, but of the broader population of Israel, whose entire project of democratic hope has been put at risk by the exclusionist theology of a restored biblical kingdom.

Equally troubling is the North Korean regime that, having been labeled ‘evil’ by President Bush, pushes back with a cosmic dualism of its own. Officially atheist, Pyongyang preserves the political amber in which a communist ‘historical materialism’ itself supplies a transcendental justification for nuclear recklessness – even if the transcendent end is purported to be purely secular. (North Korea reminds us that – after Marx – regimes animated by religious faith have no monopoly on the making of absolute claims to authority.)

In the context of the way such world developments call into question the character of religion as such, the simultaneous meltdown of authority in the Roman Catholic Church takes on special significance. At first glance, it seems the main tragedy of the priestly sex abuse scandal, apart from the personal devastation of its victims (and, of course, there is no ‘apart’ from that), lies in the discrediting of Catholic moral authority. But in fact the scandal has put on display, even for the most conservative-minded Catholics, the way in which an absolute exercise of expressly religious power, even from within a profoundly un-

fundamentalist tradition like Catholicism, can breed what also must be reckoned as fanatical violence, even if it is more psychological than physical, and even if it occurs on an intimate scale, in an apolitical context. Indeed, from the point of view of its underdog and profoundly vulnerable victims, the pathology of priestly sexual abuse and the related cover-up by bishops are exactly that – fanatical violence.

While there is no moral equivalence between the suicide-murders of Muslim fascists, the exclusionary sacralizing of disputed land by religiously nationalist Jews in Israel, the apocalyptic transcendentalism of nuclear brinkmanship (be it Washington’s or Pyongyang’s), and the Catholic preference of clerical power even over the safety of children – all of these urgent problems from different orders are manifestations of something wrong in the heart of religion.

For detached spectators, the old question has become one question: Would the world be better off without religion?

But to ask such a question from within a religious tradition is like asking, Would the world be better off without desire? (Not quite an unthinkable prospect, since certain Buddhists aim to extirpate desire.)

An emphasis on the negative consequences of faith can blur the powerful consolations and challenges that religion sponsors. Indeed the impulse to honor transcendent being, and even to recognize it as personal, can serve as much as a check on hubris as a source of it. Yes, there have been Yahweh-sponsored slaughters of Canaanites, the holy wars of Crusaders, and the jihads ancient and recent. But where Pope Urban II declared “God wills it!” at Clermont in 1095, Pope Paul VI, before the UN General Assembly in 1965, cried “Jamais plus la guerre!”

The great religions, by inviting human beings constantly to surpass themselves,
are part of what makes the human project possible. Whatever else these phenomena foster, the three Abrahamic traditions, together with Hinduism, Buddhism, and other established world religions, are organized around compassionate love for the neighbor as the motivating ideal. The great world religions, that is, having been engines of humanistic social change, remain reservoirs of humane moral sensibility. To take an example from my own tradition; the modern Catholic Church’s declared prejudice against violence (Pacem in Terris) could slow the world’s current rush to war, while the Church’s skepticism toward free market capitalism (Progressio Populorum) could mitigate the widening chasm between rich and poor.

Some religions give primacy of value to mystical union, some to works of charity, some to justice, and some to ritual observance. But all of the great religions have tracked the movement from God as unknown, to God as fearsome, to God as love itself. Here is how the great Roman Catholic theologian of the mid-twentieth century Karl Rahner articulated that broadly religious intuition: “God does not merely create something other than himself – he also gives himself to this other. The world receives God, the infinite and the ineffable mystery, to such an extent that he himself becomes its innermost life.” Religious human beings are the creatures who instinctively respond to that innermost life. “This mystery,” Rahner writes,

is the inexplicit and unexpressed horizon which always encircles and upholds the small area of our everyday experience . . . . We call this God . . . . However hard and unsatisfactory it may be to interpret the deepest and most fundamental experience at the very bottom of our being, man does experience in his innermost history that this silent, infinitely distant holy mystery, which continually recalls him to the limits of his finitude and lays bare his guilt yet bids him approach; the mystery enfolds him in an ultimate and radical love which commends itself to him as salvation and as the real meaning of his existence.

Rahner is speaking from within Christianity, but his broad theological generalization applies with comparable force to each tradition, no matter what else separates them – or so it appears to this Christian.

Positing an encompassing horizon that is ever beyond reach yet exerting an irresistible pull – and daring to name it God – the religions both accommodate and explain the human interest in what lies beyond, even within. Mystery, far from alien or threatening, is thus accounted for as essential to life on earth. Religion helps humans not to flee mystery, but to plumb it.

But such is the human condition that in every way that religion can be sacred, it can be trivial; in every way consoling, threatening. A ready source of humility, religion embodies an impulse to triumphalism, too. And the political events referred to above define what is at stake in each religion’s struggle with itself.

This complexity moves the question away from Why religion? to What kind? What in each tradition promotes peace instead of war? Tolerance instead of contempt? Self-criticism instead of smug superiority?

And these questions, far from abstract, are in fact being forced on religions by world conditions. Indeed, it is the shift in world politics – in demographics, in patterns of ethnic dispersal, in the explosion of information technology – that has transformed the situation of religion, especially of the formerly dominant religions of European imperialism.

“The West is no longer shut up in itself,” Rahner wrote:

it can no longer regard itself simply as the center of culture, with a religion which . . .
could appear as the obvious and indeed sole way of honoring God . . . Today everybody is the next-door neighbor and spiritual neighbor of everyone else in the world . . . which puts the absolute claim of our own Christian faith into question.

Absolute claims are the issue. The challenge for religions of all kinds, but perhaps especially for religions based on narratives of divine revelation, is to make positive assertions of faith that do not simultaneously denigrate the different tenets of faith held by others. Religious denigration is a source of violence. “There will be no peace among the nations,” the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng has written, “without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. There will be no dialogue between the religions without the investigation of the foundations of the religions.”

The new condition of world politics that has brought so much trouble with it is also the source of hope, because formerly triumphalist traditions now have no choice – precisely because of religious elbow-rubbing – but to encounter the truth claims of others. That means that the foundational assumptions of every religion must now be the subject of reexamination.

Just such a thing is going on inside Roman Catholicism. And if it can happen there, it can happen anywhere.

Since the Holocaust, fundamental tenets of Catholic belief have been called into question – especially aspects of the faith that have spawned the Christian anti-Judaism, which was so powerfully laid bare by its mutation into Nazi anti-Semitism. The important point is that the questioning is being done by Catholics themselves – a project that began on the margins of the Church with once suspect figures like Rahner and Küng, then moved into the center of ecclesiastical identity with the Second Vatican Council, and has been continued in fits and starts ever since. The apology in 2000 by Pope John Paul II for various sins of Catholic triumphalism, especially Catholic contempt for Jews and Jewish religion, is an emblem of this process, and one that marks its beginning, not its end.

Now the Catholic Church, in response to the crisis tied to priestly child abuse and the bishops’ cover-up, is openly grappling with such basic questions as its attitude toward sexuality, its clerical caste system, the place of the laity, the need for democracy – and, especially, the rights of women. Questions like these push to the heart of Catholic theology, which in fact had already been penetrated by the challenges tied to the Church’s relationship to the Jewish people, to those of other faiths, and to those of no faith. Adjustments must follow in claims made for Jesus, in notions of who God is, in the way sacred texts are understood and taught, in the very structure of thought about what it means to be a Catholic. Even in the throes of crisis, the Church is invigorated by a fierce debate – and it is a debate with itself.

It is for adherents of each faith to define, but some version of this grappling with fundamental belief can be seen to be occurring in other religions – certainly in Judaism, where the question of what it is to be a Jew is being asked with new power. The political crisis of Israel, an entity regarded as originating as a sign of God’s covenant, brings with it basic religious questions.

And so with Islam. The post-Septem-

ber 11 situation of Muslims seems marked by an urgent new introspection in response to the questions of reform, text, attitudes toward the other, and the tradition’s relationship to violence that
have been forced by an expressly Islamic outbreak of terror. It is up to adherents of Islam to refute the broad Western suspicion that Islamic devotion may be incompatible with democratic liberalism. But in this task, Muslim reformers have a great resource in the Islamic tradition of *convivencia*, which, even for the West, was the very incubator of tolerance – political as well as religious.

All of this defines the new shape of religious commitment, and it suggests the kind of ‘investigation’ leading to reform that only the religiously committed can undertake. Each religion must seek ways of tapping into its reservoir of neighborliness, its foundational assumptions about the goodness of creation, its attitude toward God as the world’s innermost source of love.

Criticism of religion is necessary and, these days, inevitable. But what really counts now is religious self-criticism. Detached observers among those who are not religious make a mistake to regard this project cynically, because broad religious reform is essential now to the rescue of the world itself.

Democratic values, ideological openness, freedom of conscience, positive regard for those who are different (also known as pluralism), as well as the capacity to tolerate even those who remain intolerant: these pillars of the post-Enlightenment social order will not stand unless exactly equivalent pillars are erected to reform – and thus secure – the institutions of traditional religion.

In short, I believe that religion and the social order are inseparable – which will come as no surprise to anyone who shares my faith that God is inseparable from God’s creation.
In the quarter century since the Iranian Revolution took much of the world by surprise – not least in the way its religious leadership mobilized a genuinely popular uprising – many commentators in the West have been inclined to see the Middle East and South Asia as cultural backwaters, where religion-based politics are overcoming the secular forms of political organization appropriate to modern industrial societies.

But this understanding of recent events is misleading. A comparative historical survey of the rise and fall of successive waves of secularism in the modern era reveals a more complicated and paradoxical picture of trends in Western countries and of the impact of these trends on societies struggling to emulate the economic success of the modern West.

In the survey that follows, I will focus on the conflict between secularist and antisecularist trends in a variety of different states, starting with the rise of secularism in the West. Before I begin, it will be useful to examine more closely the history of some key terms.

Over the centuries, ‘secular’ has conveyed a far wider variety of meanings than current usage may suggest. A term derived in Middle English from the Old French word *seculer* (itself from the Latin *saecularis*), the word originally referred to clergy who were not bound by the religious rules of a monastic order. In Middle English, it could also refer to the realm of the ‘this-worldly’ as opposed to the divine – the sacred and ‘other-worldly’ realms historically monopolized in Western Europe by the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, the evolving use of words based on ‘secular’ reflects, among other things, a long and contentious history; ‘secularism’ and its militant Latin sibling ‘laicism’ emerged in Western European countries that were once, if not still, dominated by Roman Catholicism.

It was only in the nineteenth century that the word ‘secular’ came to be associated with ‘secularists’ who espoused a doctrine of ‘secularism’ – that is, the belief that religious institutions and values

---

Nikki R. Keddie, professor emerita of history at the University of California at Los Angeles, has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1994. She has written on Iranian history, women in the Muslim world, religio-political trends worldwide, and Sayyed Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani. The author of “Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution” (2003), she also founded and edited the journal “Contention: Debates in Society, Culture and Science” from 1991 to 1996.
should play no role in the temporal affairs of the nation-state. These terms were coined in England in 1851 by a radical atheist, George Holyoake, who was looking for respectable euphemisms to replace ‘atheist,’ ‘infidel,’ ‘freethinker,’ ‘unbeliever,’ etc. 1 Holyoake and his successor Charles Bradlaugh led a national network of secular societies that some have seen as an alternative church–certainly these societies served social and political as well as ideological functions. Appealing largely to skilled laborers from the upper working classes, the secular societies advocated an end of privileges for the Anglican Church, and the extension of equal rights and freedoms to all religious and antireligious persons and institutions. They convinced Parliament to abolish disabilities for nonbelieving witnesses, helped discredit (though they did not succeed in abolishing) blasphemy laws, and, after Bradlaugh was elected to Parliament and refused to take the religious oath, made it possible for an avowed nonbeliever to hold office. 2 Apart from Bradlaugh, the organization’s most effective speaker and writer was the young Annie Besant, best known for her later association with the theosophy movement, with its Hindu and Buddhist overtones. 3

By the end of the nineteenth century, the political aims of secular societies had been largely achieved, in part because they were in tune with other social and cultural trends. After the death of Bradlaugh and the defection of Besant, the movement, never large, faded away. By then, Darwinism and socialism had replaced secularism as fighting creeds, and Thomas Huxley’s late-nineteenth-century coinage, ‘agnostic,’ had largely replaced ‘secularist’ as a term for religious skeptics.

The older noun ‘secularization’ underwent a somewhat analogous evolution. For centuries, the term in Latin and French referred only to a change in clerical status—for example, when a monk became a secular priest. A broader meaning was documented only after the Thirty Years’ War and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, when the term was used to describe the process whereby Brandenburg was granted church land within its borders. In the decades that followed, ‘secularization’ was often used to describe the confiscation or conversion of ecclesiastical religious institutions or property for civil possession and use. 4 By the end of the nineteenth century, ‘secularization’ was being widely used in conjunction with the terms ‘secularists’ and ‘secularism’ to refer to various state measures that weakened the Church and religion, including the disestablishment of dominant churches, the protection of religious and atheist minorities, and increased lay control of formerly religious spheres. 5 By extension, ‘secularization’ was used as well to describe a generalized process of replacing religious with


lay values in the character and direction of morality, education, and culture. For many, ‘secular’ and ‘secularist’ (and French variants on ‘laic’) remain associated with unbelief.

Enter the social scientists: only in the early twentieth century did ‘secularization’ become a scholarly category, usually traced to the sociologists Weber, Tonnies, and Troeltsch, although similar concepts can be found in earlier thinkers. In common usage today, ‘secularization’ refers to:

- an increase in the number of people with secular beliefs and practices;
- a lessening of religious control or influence over major spheres of life; and
- a growth in state separation from religion and in secular regulation of formerly religious institutions and customs.

These phenomena are to a degree logically independent, and also often independent in practice. Trying to measure the extent of secular beliefs and practices through church membership may not yield accurate results; in Europe today figures for religious belief as measured by opinion polls are considerably higher than those for church attendance and membership. Nor does the extent of belief or unbelief necessarily correlate positively with the extent of state separation from, or control over, religion.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most scholars and writers, Western and Eastern alike, saw the growth of secularism as a one-way street toward modernization—a wholly positive process according to Comte and many subsequent theorists, or a dialectical process synthesizing positive and negative moments, as hypothesized by Hegel and Marx. In the social science literature, the growth of secularism is often interpreted as a natural concomitant of the spread of science, education, and technology—all of which seem to undermine the need for religious explanations of the world and, ultimately, for powerful organized religions in modern society. Theorists with a progressive view, whether straight-line or dialectical, have also tended to imagine that people will enjoy ever greater levels of material well-being, thus diminishing the collective need for religious consolation. (It is worth bearing in mind, however, a certain imbalance in scholarly accounts: most scholars who write about secularization consider it a rational, even natural, point of view, while most scholars who write about fundamentalism are cities in terms of religious belief, but the least secular by the criterion of church-state relations.)


7 For discussions of problems regarding secularization see Steve Bruce, ed., Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). In that volume, Hugh McLeod, “Secular Cities: Berlin, London, and New York in the Later Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” 58–89, notes the ambiguity of the word ‘secularization’ and shows that in this period Berlin was by far the most secular of the three
skeptical about the value of religious politics. Most of the evidence from the West has tended to bolster this view of progressive secularization, and, despite the West’s crisis of confidence in progress, most modern governments have continued to exercise ever greater levels of control over formerly religious spheres.

At the same time, it has become increasingly clear in country after country that the political struggles between religious and secular forces are far from over—whether in Iran, India, or even the United States. Even though worldwide a great many people think religion should not affect legislation and policy-making, those who disagree are a growing force.

In the survey that follows, I shall focus on parts of the world where institutions of major world religions held power that created significant obstacles to secularization. I will therefore concentrate on areas that had either monotheistic scriptural religions with exclusive claims—namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; or a number of conflicting religions with strong incompatible claims, as in South Asia. These are the areas where important struggles over secularization have occurred. They are also, not coincidentally, the areas that have seen the recent rise in ‘fundamentalist’ movements, which I have termed ‘The New Religious Politics.’

Before the sixteenth century, religion was a major organizing principle of civilization in most of the world—and certainly in Western Europe. There the authority of the Roman Catholic Church was unrivaled: it may well have been the most powerful religious institution the world has ever seen. From the late eleventh century until about 1300, canon law had priority over secular law, and kings had to perform significant penance if they violated Church edicts. Furthermore, the Church played a leading role in organizing Crusades not only in the Holy Land, but also against heretics and non-Catholics in Europe. Later it also played a leading role in dividing the New World into Spanish and Portuguese domains.

The rise of Protestantism initially increased religiosity in Western Europe by provoking intense personal concern about religious doctrines and loyalties, among both Protestants and the reformed and aroused Catholics of the Counter Reformation. Ultimately, however, the proliferation of sects and the exhaustion of the combatants in long, bloody, and inconclusive religious wars led to increasing religious toleration. Governments gradually granted equal civil status to those holding a variety of religious and irreligious beliefs—a key condition for creating secular states. But rulers in Western Europe now had to contend with a great variety of religions.

The political implications of these changes evolved over several centuries, in a series of sometimes violent struggles that pitted rulers against established religious groups. In England, Henry VIII (r. 1509 – 1547) broke with Rome, confiscated church lands, and closed monasteries. In Italy three centuries later, the nationalists under King Victor Emman-


10 Thomas Renna, Church and State in Medieval Europe 1050 – 1314 (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1974).
pope Pius IX (r. 1861–1878) stripped the Church of its control over the papal states and Rome, resulting in a break in relations between the Vatican and the Italian government that lasted into the twentieth century. In France, the struggle between the government and the Church, begun in 1789 during the French Revolution, culminated between 1901 and 1905 in the confiscation of religious property and in a strict separation of church and state. In Spain, Portugal, and many nations in Latin America, analogous struggles followed a broadly similar course.  

Regarding these trends, Western thinkers drew a variety of conclusions. Some thinkers, such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, advocated religious tolerance, while others, particularly in France during the Enlightenment, harshly criticized organized religion. But even some of the harshest critics (Voltaire, for one) believed that religion might be good for the lower classes, keeping them honest, diligent, and peaceful – a proposition that came to seem especially credible after the anticlerical violence unleashed during the French Revolution.  

The French Revolution also made it clear that nationalism – a growing sentiment of shared moral, political, and social attachments expressed through the institutions of the nation-state – might well rival, or even replace, religiosity in the minds of newly self-conscious citizens. Traditional religious loyalties potentially conflicted with the priorities of emergent nation-states; even before the rise of modern nationalism, European regimes tried to weaken religious institutions that interfered with their secular power.  

Nationalism created an ideological basis for nonreligious loyalties and also made it easier to extend equal rights to citizens professing different religious beliefs, and possible to encourage national networks of production and consumption. Although in some modern European countries – for example, Poland and Ireland – nationalism has utilized religious sentiments, in most it has been a force for secularization, putting national loyalty above religion and rendering the nation-state stronger than any church, even in the presence of state religions, as in England.  

The period from 1860 to 1914 was probably the heyday in Europe of expansive secularization, just as it was the heyday of optimistic theories of evolutionary human progress, from Karl Marx to Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. As Eric Hobsbawm describes the period:  

Traditional religion was receding with unprecedented rapidity, both as an intellectual force and among the masses. This was to some extent an almost automatic consequence of urbanization….In the Roman Catholic countries, which comprised 45 percent of the European population, faith retreated particularly fast … before the joint offensive of … middle-class rationalism and the socialism of...
school teachers, but especially of the combi-
nation of emancipatory ideals and polit-
ical calculation which made the fight
against the Church the key issue in polit-
ics.14

These changes were accompanied by a
surge in secular control over education
and a rise in Marxist socialism, especial-
ly among workers. “In many ways Marx-
ism [in Karl Kautsky’s version] … was
the last triumph of nineteenth-century
positivist scientific confidence. It was
materialist, determinist, inevitabilist,
evolutionist, and firmly identified the
‘laws of history’ with the ‘laws of sci-
ence.’”15

In Eastern European countries, where
orthodox Christianity prevailed, secular-
ism was also a rising trend between the
seventeenth and early twentieth century.
Peter the Great (r. 1682 – 1725) abolished
the Russian patriarchate, created church
government by synod, and installed a
government representative as chief pro-
curator of the synod. Catherine the
Great (r. 1762 – 1796) confiscated much
church land, and a succession of nine-
teenth-century tsars took further meas-
ures to control the Orthodox Church.16
In these years, secularization was prima-
arily a top-down affair carried out for rea-
sions of state. While democratic and so-
cialist secularists spoke for parts of the
urban intelligentsia, the rural majority
of Russia’s people remained devoutly
Christian.

After the October 1917 revolution, the
Bolsheviks – committed to Marx’s athe-
ist worldview – disestablished the Or-
thodox Church and expropriated its
assets. Violent nationwide campaigns
against the Church, religious belief, and
the clergy ensued. These policies
changed during World War II, and in
1943 the regime accepted an accommo-
dation with the Church that restored the
patriarchate. The end of communism in
the Soviet Union enabled the Church to
recover considerable property and influ-
ence, but levels of religious belief and
church attendance remained low,17 indi-
cating that even top-down secularization
can succeed in undermining religious
belief in some circumstances. (Similar-
ly low levels of church and mosque atten-
dance have been reported in post-
Communist orthodox Bulgaria and Ser-
bia, as well as in many other areas of
Eastern Europe and the former Soviet
Union.)

European Jewry was also affected by a
broad secular trend, especially in West-
ern Europe. In countries like Germany
and France, middle-class Jews welcomed
the separation of church and state and
the spread of civil equality. Theodor
Herzl and most of the other late-
nineteenth-century founders of political
Zionism were secularists – but many of
their followers in Eastern Europe were
not. Among European Jews, secularism
and nationalism were not entirely con-
gruent forces: many Zionists, especially
on the popular level, were not secular-
ists, and many secularists were not Zion-
ists.

14 E. J. Hobsbawm, The Age of Empire 1875 – 1914
15 Ibid., 267.
16 See Gregory L. Freeze, “Eastern Orthodoxy,”
Encyclopedia of European Social History, vol. 5
(New York: Scribner, 2001), 313 – 326; Robert
L. Nichols, “The Church in Imperial Russia,”
The Donald W. Treadgold Papers In Russian, East
European and Central Asian Studies, 102 (Seattle :
The Henry M. Jackson School of International
Studies, University of Washington, 1995); Geof-
frey Hosking, Russia: People and Empire 1552 –
1917 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University
Press, 1997).
17 Freeze, “Eastern Orthodoxy.”
Meanwhile, in the United States throughout the nineteenth century, though secular principles organized political life, a variety of religions flourished, partly because the equal treatment of different Christian churches in America left people free to join or found a religion of their choice. But when religiously minded intellectuals in America moved toward more rationalist and socially reformist interpretations of religion in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it provoked a backlash from literalist Protestant conservatives, who fought the gradual secularization of behavior, belief, and public schooling.

Even in European countries at the zenith of expansive secularization, religious groups did not accept the situation without a struggle. In Germany, divided between Protestants and Catholics, a Catholic party formed and gained considerable strength. And in the past half century, a number of Western nations have experienced a renewal of political claims on behalf of religious values and institutions.

Doubts about the wisdom of unmitigated secularism have been provoked by a variety of developments. One was the devastation caused by the two world wars and subsequent regional bloodbaths. The civilized peoples’ capacity to commit acts of mass destruction, far worse than anything experienced in the nineteenth century, bred pessimism about progress. Another factor was the mixed performance of economic systems, whether capitalist or socialist, that were supposed to ensure the wealth of nations. Although most people living in the West enjoyed a steady rise in their standard of living, the new economic order created new uncertainties: cycles of boom and bust, increasing income gaps, high levels of unemployment. Recent rapid globalization of the world economy has exacerbated many of these problems and tensions and has lowered living standards for many. Working-class solidarity, trade unionism, and indeed the industrial working class itself have all proved weaker than socialists expected.

The new secular social systems have also had mixed success, ameliorating some major problems but often creating new ones. The decline in racial barriers worldwide was a major advance, but was nowhere accompanied by adequate educational, health, and other measures to provide equality of opportunity among racial groups. Ethnic tensions have sometimes worsened. Many parts of Europe have seen growing hostility to immigrants, especially to Muslims. Women have won greater equality, but very few countries have adequate child care and other services for working mothers. Some women, given current difficulties, long for a return to the days of the idealized two-parent, male-breadwinner family, often associated with religious morality.

In short, secularism is nowhere in the West a simple fait accompli. The spread of secular beliefs and practices in Europe and the United States has involved slow change and continuing, sometimes sharp, debate. As a result, it would be foolish to expect that secularist reforms would somehow be accomplished more easily in the Middle East and South Asia. I would argue that the slow ripening of secular tendencies is more important than doctrinal differences in explaining the current strength of secularism in the West. As even a short survey indicates, the West was at first no more open to secularization than are parts of the Middle East and South Asia today. As I have argued elsewhere, the common idea that religion and politics have always been more inextricably intertwined in Islam
than in Christianity is untrue. Typically, governments in the Muslim world followed Islamic rules only to the extent they thought it was in their interest to do so.

Secularism as an animating set of political beliefs came late to the Muslim world, as a by-product of the growing influence of Western political ideas. While Christian Europe underwent its epochal series of struggles between church and state, most Muslim countries remained moderately religious in orientation. Throughout the early modern period, the majority of Middle Eastern rulers adhered to Islam, and Muslim religious leaders continue to play an active role in civil society, though without making claims to temporal authority of the sort advanced by the Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation.

Because secularization has progressed unevenly around the world, secularists in the Middle East now face some of the difficulties previously encountered in Western Europe. For example, just last century, secularists in France and Italy were hesitant to grant women suffrage, for fear that the majority of them would vote with the Catholic Church; some secularists in Arab countries today fear the majority of a free electorate will elect religious parties. Similarly, in 1902 the leaders of the French Radical Party issued an election program that proposed that “By suppressing religious orders, by secularizing ecclesiastical property in mortmain, and by abolishing payment of public money to the clergy, we mean to put into practice this decisive liberal formula – free churches in a free and sovereign state”; a few decades later, a somewhat similar policy was pursued in Atatürk’s Turkey, in part because Turkish secularists had reasons to fear the socioeconomic, political, and cultural power of their own religious elite.

Western European regimes were inconsistent in their application of secularizing principles – especially in their colonies. While the French and some other colonial powers were suppressing religious schooling at home, they encouraged it in their colonies as part of a wider cultural project. The French colonies, where conservative diplomats and military officers dominated, were exempted from anticlerical laws, as the Catholic orders continued to receive French government subsidies and support for colonial educational institutions by arguing that local nationalists would otherwise take over. Colonial policy sometimes favored certain religious groups, thus increasing sectarian strife – but it also introduced some leaders in colonized areas to Western thinking about secularization and modernization. After studying at Western-model schools or returning to the Middle East and South Asia from schools in the West, several of them opted for secular nationalism, which after World War II became a dominant mode of decolonization not only in India, Turkey, and Tunisia, but also in Egypt, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

While some have compared the politico-religious ferment in the Muslim world today with the rise of Protestantism, a closer, though still inexact, parallel is the history of religious-secular struggles in Catholic countries. In both possible parallels, religion claimed power in politics, law, personal behavior, and the regulation of gender and family


roles. But whereas some version of secularism has emerged victorious in almost every Catholic country, the past few decades have seen a dramatic growth in the influence of so-called Islamists – Muslims who want to consolidate religion and politics in novel combinations that they present as traditional.20

Contrary to Christian practice, in Islam there has never been a central body to decide religious dogma; even the central institution of Islamic law has never been universally applied. Here my discussion will center on the Middle East and Pakistan, which include the strictest regions of Islam; and it should be noted that in Southeast Asia and in Africa south of the Sahara, where Islam spread late and peacefully, Islamic law and practice has usually been less strict.

Terms like ‘secular’ were never widely used in Muslim countries until the twentieth century. Then, until roughly 1967, secularists, nationalists, and socialists played a growing political role in the Muslim world, coming to power in several countries and carrying out secularizing programs as a concomitant to modernization.

The Ottoman Empire and Turkey, its most central successor state, played a pioneering role in this regard. Under the Ottoman Empire, the state exercised an unusual amount of control over its religious institutions. For example, Muslim scholars, or ulama, were hierarchically organized and sanctioned by the state, and Ottoman sultans often issued decrees with the force of law. The powers of the central government grew after 1826, enabling it to initiate a number of secularizing measures in the nineteenth century, often under Western pressure. These measures included significant government control over vakf (mortmain) property and the declaration of equal rights for Muslims and non-Muslims. Meanwhile, nationalism grew in the army and among the educated middle classes.

The biggest impetus to secular nationalism came after World War I, with the accession to power of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. A war hero, he had led the Turkish troops that repelled the European invaders, forcing the Allied powers to recognize Turkish control of enough territory to constitute a viable nation-state. Since the sultan-caliph had acquiesced in the possibility of an Allied dismemberment of Turkey, there was little internal resistance to Atatürk’s abolition of the sultanate and then of the caliphate, though the abolition of the latter aroused resistance in other parts of the Muslim world.

The need for strong government action to establish a secular state was due both to the residual strength of existing Islamic institutions and the felt need to catch up with a West that had a long head start in centralization and modernization. Atatürk’s secularizing measures included the romanization of the script and outlawing the use of Arabic – and the abolition of religious education and of Shariah. Modeling Turkish law on the Swiss Civil Code, Atatürk granted women almost equal rights and discouraged veiling. His were the strongest measures against religious institutions any-

20 These problems were early suggested by Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), and are stressed in Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). The trend to moderation of Iran’s policies since the 1978–1979 revolution and the early loss of Muslim faith in Iran as a model for revolution elsewhere are relevant, and are discussed in Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).
where outside the Communist world, as he and many Turkish nationalists adopted the French model of militant laicism. It is not surprising that after World War II there was a backlash against some of Atatürk’s most aggressively secularizing measures. Even secular politicians wanting better relations with the oil-rich Arab world made gestures toward Islam. A dramatic sign of antisecularist reaction was Turkey’s giving an electoral plurality to an Islamist party and the appointment of a prime minister from that party in 1996. This in turn produced a secularist reaction, especially within the military, and the Islamist prime minister resigned in the summer of 1997. Mainly because of a deep economic crisis, a new Islamist-based but more moderate and formally secular AK Party won a plurality in the November 2002 elections and has since led the government. Periodic struggles continue over issues like the prohibition of Islamic head covering for women in state localities such as Parliament and universities. This prohibition may eventually be rescinded, but the basic secular nature of Turkey’s government is unlikely to change. This is partly because Turkey has hopes of joining the European community, and partly because the active majority of Turks are still secular, though often willing to allow freedom of dress, and the ruling party is not threatening basic secularism.

As in Russia, much of the population was successfully secularized by governmental fiat and policies. There is not as much religious backlash in Turkey today as in several Arab countries in the Middle East, and Turkey is unique in its renunciation of Islamic justifications for laws and institutions. (Laws on women’s status have been similarly reformed in Tunisia, but there the reform was carried out under Islamic justification.)

In Iran, the ulama had far more independent power than anywhere else in the Muslim world, due to developments in Iranian Shiism after it became the state religion in 1501. Only in the late nineteenth century did nationalism begin to grow in the country: in dramatic contrast to Muslim leaders, early Iranian nationalists blamed the country’s decline on the seventh-century Arab Islamic conquest, and vaunted its ancient ‘Aryan’ (linguistically Indo-European) heritage. Disgruntled ulama allied with merchants and nationalist reformers in a partially successful antigovernmental revolt in 1890 – 1891. Beginning in late 1905, a revolution produced a constitutional parliamentary regime that continued in power until Russia and Britain intervened in 1911.

Reza Shah, who governed Iran from 1921 until 1941, imitated Atatürk, though in his less modern nation he could not go as far. He centralized his country—chiefly by forcibly settling nomads, improving education, transport, and com-


munications, and promoting the secular nationalist view of Iran hitherto favored by intellectuals. Simultaneously, he forced his citizens to adopt Western dress, promoted a secular public school system, and so forth. Modernizing secularization continued under his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941 – 1979), and was widely associated with subservience to the United States and its interests, especially after American leadership and British involvement in the 1953 coup that overthrew the popular (and secular) Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. Modernization, which took place there almost entirely between 1925 and 1975, was much more sudden in Iran than it had been in Turkey. Meanwhile, the suppression of secular opposition opened the way for the rapid rise and 1979 victory of a multifaceted revolutionary movement led by a religious opposition that appealed to widespread anti-Western and anti-tyrannical feelings. 23

Other Muslim countries had only partly similar trajectories, which I will describe in brief. By a historical contingency, in the Middle East only Arab countries experienced Western colonial rule. Almost all of them outside the Arabian Peninsula were for a time either colonies, protectorates, or mandates of Britain or France. Western control of Palestine in the crucial years after 1918 culminated in the creation of Israel, which greatly strengthened anti-Western currents in the Arab Middle East. In Palestine and Algeria, the only Muslim countries occupied by foreign settlers, there was a strong counter-assertion of national and religious identities, prompted in large part by efforts to assert local, non-Western cultural values in regions ruled by the West.

Secular nationalists generally led the anticolonial liberation movements after World War II. In Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser participated in a 1952 revolution and survived an assassination attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954, which he used to legitimate a crackdown on religious institutions; two years later, Nasser declared Egypt a socialist state. Popular support for his brand of secularism began to fade with the defeat of Egypt by Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967, and his successors, as autocratic as he, provoked even deeper distrust by instituting ‘free market’ policies that, critics charged, primarily served Western interests. Current Egyptian Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak has not limited his crackdown to militant Islamists; he has arrested and brought to trial a number of dissidents, including civil rights leaders like Saad Eddin Ibrahim.

In Tunisia after its 1956 independence, Habib Bourguiba instated strongly secular measures that reinterpreted Islam, weakened religious institutions, and introduced virtually equal rights for women. His successor, Ben Ali, however, has autocratically suppressed both Islamists of all varieties and civil rights lawyers and advocates.

In Algeria, governmental suppression of the 1992 elections that Islamists were poised to win led to a bloody civil war, but also to a significant decline in militant Islamism. 24 Jordan and Morocco’s recent histories are more moderate; Saudi Arabia is ruled under a strict Islamic

---


creed that dates back to the eighteenth century; Syria and pre-war Iraq have simultaneously suppressed Islamic and non-Islamic opposition. Militant Islam is still a strong force in much of the Muslim world, but I would agree with those who point to its weakening in recent years in key centers including Iran, Egypt, and Algeria. Despite the bin Laden phenomenon, it seems unlikely that militant Islamists will take over more Arab governments in the near future. On the other hand, recent U.S. policies toward the Arab-Israeli dispute, Pakistan, and most recently, Iraq, have led to a growth in both Islamist and non-Islamist hostility to the U.S. government in the Arab world, Turkey, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia that could be expressed in further violence against American and Western targets.

The fatal association of secularism with autocratic rule and Western influence helps account for the general trend against secularism in the Muslim world; when people want to be free of Western control, they don’t generally envision the path to their salvation in the secularist ideas sovereign in the West. The creation in recent decades of modernized and highly political versions of Islam encourages mobilization of the still-religious masses and provides the elements of an ideology that seems familiar, powerful—and untainted by Western influence.

In recent years, Islamist Muslims have introduced antisecular elements rare in past Islamic history, like the total intertwining of religion and politics and the political primacy of clerical and lay Muslim leaders. The idea and practice of codifying Islamic law and making it the law of the state is also distinctly modern. Still, most people attracted to Islamist ideologies do not envision a violent overthrow of their governments; they rather wish to establish political parties and participate in free elections. Several Islamists today champion values long associated with secularism in the West, including democracy and respect for modern science, technology, and education. Anti-Western terrorism, while of natural international concern, involves a very small minority of Muslims, and has thus far spread far less than many feared after 2001.

Paradoxically enough, the Islamic country where forms of secularism are most popular today is probably Iran. Reformists have won repeated electoral victories in the country since 1997, demonstrations against the hard-liners who control the government are increasingly frequent, and there is a healthy ferment in the arts. Just as the Iranian revolution was briefly seen as a model in much of the Muslim world, so Iranian reformism and activist opposition to clerical autocracy are now models for many outside Iran. Furthermore, in Iran as elsewhere, a number of writers, mostly women, have undertaken the difficult issue of interpreting early Islamic traditions as implying equality for women, and there have been a few legal and many social changes in the direction of greater gender equality, though laws are far more unequal than they were under

25 Kepel, Jihad; Olivier Roy is also writing a book on these questions.

26 These points are emphasized in several chapters of Islam and Secularism in the Middle East, ed. Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito (London: Hurst and Co., 2000).

the Shah.  

Women now comprise 63 percent of university entrants, as health, education, and family programs have brought birthrates down from seven per woman to two.

Some intellectuals in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world think that advances associated with secularism in the West can be achieved via reinterpretations of Islam without renouncing the ties between state and religion. The economic failures and cultural repression experienced under Islamic rule have disillusioned most Iranians, whose anticlericalism is exemplified by the pervasive refusal of the country’s taxi drivers to pick up clerics. Many Iranians are speaking not only against clerical rule, but also explicitly in favor of the separation of religion and the state. The failures of the Islamic Republic have also dampened enthusiasm for Islamic revolution and rule elsewhere.

The dynamics of secularization in South Asia and Israel, where religion and nationalism have been closely intertwined for decades, have been somewhat different from those in the West and the Middle East. In Pakistan and Israel, religious identity spurred movements to create a nation, movements chiefly based on religious nationalism. And in both countries religion-based parties have grown since the states’ formation, and constitute a significant element in political life.

The early leaders of Israel’s Zionist movement were, however, secularists, as were a number of Pakistan’s founders, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah. And secularist intellectuals continue to be stronger in these countries than in much of the Islamic Middle East. As a result, there is no consensus that being a Jewish or Muslim state requires any further strengthening of religious laws.

Pakistan differs greatly from Israel, however; it trails Israel in modernization and education programs, and must also contend with widespread poverty and persistent tribal and regional power centers. Having enacted, under General Zia ul-Haq in the 1970s, ‘Islamic’ laws that discriminate against women and religious minorities, it is also substantially different from Israel on the social front. Current Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has secular aims, but by his acts he has alienated many Islamists and democratic secularists alike, and he is having trouble in his efforts to introduce secular education into the far-flung madrasas. Ultimately, Israel’s government and society, despite all the privileges granted to Jews and the religious parties, are more secular than Pakistan’s.

The case of India, where Hinduism is practiced among several other major religions, is more complex. Hinduism, it has been argued, did not originate as a single religion, but rather was ‘reformed’ into a unity of doctrine and practice after the coming of the British and the development of clearer Christian and Muslim identities within the country. Reform movements that incorporated Western influences first emerged in India during the early nineteenth century and developed earliest among Hindus, who occupied more middle-class positions than Muslims.


Founded in 1885, the Indian National Congress was predominantly liberal-secular, and officially neutral regarding religion. Such religious neutrality seemed necessary if the party was to enlist both Muslims and Hindus in the struggle for national independence. On the other hand, some leaders’ emphasis on Hindu issues (for example, the movement against cow slaughter) as advocated in the early twentieth century by B. G. Tilak attracted mostly Hindu support and alienated some non-Hindus.

In the first years of the twentieth century, divisive communal issues came to the fore with the abortive partition of Bengal, favored by Muslims but broadly opposed by Hindus. The dispute over Bengal led to the formation of the Muslim League and to the granting of separate electorates, at first for local bodies, based on religion. Congress and the Muslim League cooperated in the Khilafat movement of support for the Ottoman caliphate during and after World War I, but this became a nonissue with Atatürk’s abolition of the caliphate, and the cooperation broke down.

The Congress Party attracted a number of Muslim politicians, most prominently A. K. Azad, at a time when the Muslim League was far from securing the majority of Muslim voters. Congress secularism had unacknowledged contradictions, however, and the successes of the party’s outstanding leader Mohandas Gandhi were partly due to the mass appeal of his spiritual themes such as nonviolence and asceticism, which were closer to certain Hindu and Jain traditions than to Islam. On the other hand, the religious Gandhi and his agnostic fellow Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru were in agreement that the national movement and ultimate national government of a united India should be secular in its policies and treat all religions equally.

In elections for provincial legislatures in 1937, the Muslim League did not get the majority of Muslim votes, but subsequently many Muslims found the performance of the Congress-dominated legislatures pro-Hindu and discriminatory. In the 1940s, after the Muslim League’s determination to make Pakistan a Muslim state further aroused communal-religious feelings, most Muslims actively supported the creation of a separate Muslim state. While partition might have been avoided – especially if Nehru had accepted proposals for substantial autonomy for Muslim regions – it instead took effect with brutal suddenness after the hasty departure of the British in 1947. Large-scale massacres occurred on both sides.

And in the decades that followed the partition, three major Indian leaders were assassinated for religio-political reasons: Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 by a Hindu nationalist; Nehru’s daughter, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in 1984 by a Sikh militant; and her son, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991 by a Hindu adherent of the Tamil Tigers.

In India after the partition, maintaining state secularism and religious neutrality proved difficult, and the Indian constitution did not establish a uniform civil code. In 1985, a crisis ensued when a branch of the Indian supreme court ruled that an elderly Muslim woman, Shah Bano, was entitled to maintenance by her ex-husband under a section of the Indian Criminal Code, and went beyond this in advocating a uniform civil code. This led to significant Hindu-Muslim conflict, though some Muslim women and liberals agreed with the judgment. Rajiv Gandhi’s Congress (I) government backtracked, however, successfully.

pushing a 1986 law exempting Muslim women from the law of maintenance. A Hindu nationalist backlash was a factor in the ultimately successful campaign to demolish the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.\(^\text{32}\) Other governmental acts that encouraged communal reactions included affirmative action policies for Muslims and for disfavored castes and tribes at a time when educated Hindus were experiencing high unemployment.

In recent years, Hindu nationalism has grown in power; its party, the BJP, currently leads the government. A number of intellectuals, including Ashis Nandy, T. N. Madan, and Partha Chatterjee, have questioned either secularism itself or the particular secularist policies of past governments. Some Indian intellectuals defend secularism, but criticize its application, arguing, for example, that Nehru and his followers adopted a top-down policy, doing little to negotiate with religious people before handling problems with insensitivity. Others criticize the government’s conformity to public opinion. As a result of these ongoing controversies, contemporary India has produced perhaps the world’s largest contemporary body of publications debating the merits of secularism.\(^\text{33}\)

The conflict between secularism and religious nationalism has been a recurrent theme of recent South Asian history not only in India but also in Sri Lanka. In reaction to Hindu and Muslim versions of religious nationalism, Sikh and Buddhist nationalist movements have emerged in South Asia. In India, Sikhs and Muslims have clashed with Hindus; in Sri Lanka, Buddhists are battling Hindus. All of these religious nationalist movements have contributed to a weakening of secularism in the region.\(^\text{34}\)

The Indian situation differs from that of the Muslim world in that it involves reactions against a longstanding secular government with democratic elections. At the same time, Western political hegemony is less of an issue in India. India and the Muslim world are similar in that secularism developed there much more rapidly than in the West—imposed top-down on populations that have not yet embraced a secular outlook.

Another area where secularism has been on the defensive, and religio-politics on the rise, is a very different country, neither third world nor newly established: the United States.

The United States has little in common with the countries surveyed so far, and very possibly most of the reasons for the attacks on secularism in the United States are different from those elsewhere, even though its antisecular forces became strong almost simultaneously. There do, however, seem to be some similarities.

\(^\text{32}\) See especially the chapters on South Asia in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Wade Proudfoot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).


Notably, the rise of the New Religious Politics since 1970 is in part a reaction to strong and sometimes resented secular measures, accompanied by a rise in government centralization and increasing encroachment in many spheres of life. In the United States there have been a number of secularizing governmental measures, but antisecular opposition has focused in particular on two Supreme Court decisions: the outlawing of school prayer in 1962 and the legalization of abortion in 1973. The fundamentalists’ earlier focus on creationism versus evolution, a matter for local governments and school boards, has expanded to encompass opposition to schools’ teaching about homosexuality – and, indeed, about sex at all.35

Throughout the world, the strengthening of antisecular political parties and movements has been accompanied by some weakening of secular parties and movements, a weakening due not only to political failures but also to popular disillusionment with the old secular ideologies and panaceas. The end of Communism unleashed in some populations a renewal of religious traditions not wholly lost in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Among worldwide behavioral trends are the rise of freer sexual habits, resulting in more babies born out of wedlock and a rise in sexually transmitted diseases and crime rates, and a felt decline in community action and spirit, partly due to atomizing forces like television. Some people find in revived religious ties and morality a partial or complete solution for such problems.

In the past, when religion and government were usually intertwined, it was easy for dissidents to see the weakening of religious powers and the creation of secular states as major steps to solving social problems. Similarly, today, when secularism and government are usually intertwined, it is easy for dissidents to react against secular states and call for an obvious alternative – renewed political power for religion. The same ‘enemy of my enemy is my friend’ logic applies to ideology. In the past, when secular ideologies like nationalism, socialism, and free market capitalism had not been widely tried, they could more easily be presented as keys to creating a better world. In recent decades this situation has been reversed, and religious groups no longer tied to government have been able to advance religious solutions to intractable secular problems.

A related dynamic is at work in some intellectual circles, in which disillusion with various older secular ideals has opened the door for some to reinstate religion or create new religious ideologies. This goes along with the upswing in identity politics in recent decades, where religion, along with ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference, has become a basis of political solidarity, in part replacing older identities based on class or patriotism, or on universalist worldviews like socialism and liberalism.

In some ways, however, the rise in religiosity and decline in secularism are perhaps less pervasive than they seem. For one thing, all sorts of traditions eschewed by the Westernized educated classes have come to be seen, often erroneously, as belonging to religious tradi-

In the Islamic world as in the United States, the religious Right has embraced a romantic view of traditional social relations, projecting a picture of harmony that never, or rarely, existed. At the same time, when religious parties have come to power, as in Iran, they have tended to retain, or eventually to reinstate, important components of modern secularism. Not only, for example, did Iran’s Islamic Republic adopt a largely secular constitution using Western models, but its economy, foreign policy, and educational system are also run on mainly secular lines, despite a religious overlay that, as with the U.S. religious Right, concerns mainly questions of gender and sexuality.

The backlash to secularism is likely to produce its own backlash, which is happening already in Iran, particularly among young people and women, who have been able to force some changes in policy. In the United States too, for all the superior grassroots political organization of the religious Right, fundamentalism has so far been unable to win majority support, either in elections or in polling on major moral and social issues, even though it has importantly influenced Republican policies.

Taking the world as a whole, we see that secularism today is not in overwhelming retreat, although antisecular ideologies now have more strength than they did some decades ago. Still, the struggle between secular and religious worldviews is far from over.

In conclusion, I think it is worth stressing two major points that emerge from this brief comparative historical survey of secularism around the world:

First, secularization around the world has been a far longer, more difficult, and more partial process than is usually assumed. It requires a profound change in human outlook: in both the West and the East, the difficulties of establishing stable secular regimes have often been underestimated.

Second, the Western path to secularism, and indeed the Western definitions of secularism, may not be fully applicable in all parts of the world, because of religious differences and the complex impact of Western colonialism. It is therefore predictable that non-Western states that try to establish secularism quickly by government fiat, without marshaling popular support, will experience serious difficulties – and run the risk of provoking a religious backlash. Modern religious rule has not, however, solved the problems that brought it to power. It has increased inequalities between genders and among religious communities and has brought about its own backlash and countermobilizations.

There is some reason to worry that Samuel Huntington’s messianic vision of a “clash of civilizations,” even though it seemed to many of his commentators to be based on a rather superficial understanding of various parts of the world, might become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of the military schemes and actions of the present U.S. government and its coterie of advisers.

What seems the best hope against the prophecy being fulfilled is the fact of a quite different kind of clash, one within the civilizations of which Huntington writes. Let me focus on Islam in particular, since it is so much the focus of current events and thinking.

Reflective and knowledgeable people acknowledge and often assert that most Muslims are not absolutists or ‘fundamentalists,’ to use the more misleading term. Even the president of the United States said so repeatedly in waging wars against two countries with predominantly Muslim populations. Most Muslims, even when they are devout, have no particular absolutist vision of their creed. That is to say, they have no particular desire to perpetrate atrocious (and self-defeating) acts of terrorist violence in Islam’s name, no particular desire to live lives observant in the last detail of Shariah laws, no particular desire to live under the tyrannies of oppressive governments that impose the strictest of Islamic ideologies upon them, such as for instance in Saudi Arabia or Iran. And finally, though they may often justifiably conceive of the West, and especially America, as a political and economic threat to them (because of its sometimes naked pursuit of corporate interests, its support of Israeli occupation and expansion in Palestinian territory, its cynical support over decades of Islamic fundamentalist groups whenever that suited its geopolitical interests), unlike the absolutists, they do not particularly reject, as a religious threat coming from ‘infidels,’ the various ideas and freedoms entrenched in Western political practice.

The clash I have in mind, then, is between the values of these Muslims and those of the absolutists, whom they far outnumber. That brings me to the theme of my paper: It is right, I think, to describe this clash within Muslim popula-
tions as a clash between secularists and absolutists. Let me explain why.

A few years ago, the journalist Christopher Hitchens gave an interesting lecture on secularism at Columbia University. Inevitably, the question of Islam came up. I raised a point during the discussion and in his response he made the extraordinary claim that the very category of a ‘moderate Muslim’ was incoherent, that it was doubtful that you can have religious convictions and not be given to fundamentalist tendencies and sympathies. I don’t think he was especially picking on Islam. This was a reaction to religion in general, familiar from a robust British intellectual tradition stretching from Bertrand Russell to Richard Dawkins.¹ So, thinking he must have something more subtle and plausible in mind, I asked him a question that I thought could not possibly get an affirmative answer: “It seems to follow from what you have said that it is impossible to have genuinely secular societies until everyone, or at any rate most people, are irreligious – but you don’t mean that, do you?” He said, “Yes, I do.”

If he is right, then it is quite wrong to describe the ‘clash’ of values in the way I just did, as a conflict between the secularist and the absolutist. If he is right, then we are not likely to have genuinely secular societies virtually anywhere in the world for a very long time.

But he is wrong. The term ‘secularism’ today, whatever its origins and history of use, describes only a political doctrine, a doctrine about how citizens, even citizens who are devout people, agree to live and try and flourish in a polity that is not governed by religious principles and practices. This of course means that they may have to give up strict adherence to some elements of their religion – those that aspire to a political relevance and that clash with familiar liberal laws. To be prepared to do so is the mark of what I was calling ‘ordinary’ or ‘moderate’ or ‘non-absolutist’ Muslims. Since everyone acknowledges that such Muslims considerably outnumber the absolutists, the prospect of secularism, soberly understood along these lines, is in principle far better than Hitchens’s view suggests.

This is not to deny that a great deal of very difficult and important effort is needed to realize that prospect. But whatever the needed effort is, it does not amount to what Hitchens has in mind, viz., to bring about a society of unbelievers, attractive though that might be for atheists like Hitchens and me.

What needs to be done depends on how we diagnose the moral psychology of Islamic politics today in different parts of the world.

Hitchens is perhaps led to his conclusion of a somewhat heavy-handed ideal of an irreligious conception of the secular because of a certain powerlessness and even unwillingness on the part of ‘ordinary’ Muslims to confront the absolutists. Though I do not on this basis come to his conclusion (because to do so is premature and does not dig deep), I do have the anxiety and disappointment that many of us feel when we see most ‘ordinary’ Muslims sit silently by while the much smaller group of absolutists gets the limelight. The right response to this no doubt troubling phenomenon is not to give up on the very idea that a practicing Muslim can be secular; it is rather to try and diagnose why the ordinary Muslim is sitting silently by; why he or she is not more critical of the absolutist with whom he or she shares so little by way of ideology and ideal.

¹ This tradition has mostly targeted doctrinal religions such as Christianity and Islam rather than, say, Buddhism.
Before taking up that question, it is worth noting first the manifest relevance here of an elementary link between arithmetic and politics. If most Muslims everywhere (including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan) are not absolutists, it seems remarkable that these non-absolutist voices are not heard as the representative voices of Islam, wherever it exists. It is remarkable that the much smaller group of absolutists seems more central to the image and the voice that Islamic nations project.

Since an explicit rationale of democratic politics is that it calibrates representation with numbers, the failure of democratization in these societies is one obvious diagnosis for this remarkable discrepancy. We know that in elections in Iran and Pakistan the fundamentalist parties never get anything close to a majority. In Pakistan whenever there have been elections, they do not get even 10 percent of the vote. In fact, it is a perfectly safe generalization to say that fundamentalist Islamic parties meet with very little success in democratic elections everywhere in the world, unless they have been persecuted or suppressed, such as in Algeria.

The problem is slightly different in countries where Muslims are a minority, such as in India (or for that matter, Britain), and where there are functioning democracies. In these countries, the state (responding for political reasons to possibly disruptive pressures from an aggrieved and aggressive interest group) generally pays far greater attention to absolutist Muslim voices than to the vastly more numerous (but relatively muted) voices of moderates. In this circumstance, absolutists implicitly become the voice of the community, and exercise an influence quite disproportionate to their numbers.

Here, by the nature of the case, the arithmetic points to a slightly different political diagnosis. Since these are democratic nations with all the formal apparatus of a democratic state, what is evidently needed is not merely a democratic polity, but far greater democracy within the Muslim community, which will allow the absolutist voices to be shown up for what they are: a shrill but unrepresentative minority.

What forms such democratization should or could take within minority communities in democratic states like India and Britain is a complex question with no easy and obvious answer. It is a subject that is unduly neglected in political sociology and political theory.

Still, democratization itself will be hard to achieve – whether within Muslim minorities in democratic countries like India or in Muslim countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia – unless moderate Muslims are able to come out of their shells. To do so, they must become much more openly critical of the fundamentalists, with whom they share so little.

But criticism of fundamentalist Muslims by moderates has to date been relatively muted, largely, I think, because of a deep-seated moral psychology: As a result of a long colonial history, with its detailed subjugations and attitudes of condescension, and as a result of continuing feelings of helplessness in the face of what is perceived as American domination and Israeli occupation and expansion, even moderate Muslims feel that to criticize their own people in any way is letting the side down, somehow capitulating to a long-standing history of being colonized and made to feel inferior.

This suggests that there is yet another clash that is pertinent, a clash of attitudes and values, not this time between moderates and fundamentalists, but a
clash internal to the psychology of moderates themselves. Most moderate Muslims are torn between their dislike for fundamentalist visions of their religion and societies on the one hand, and, on the other, their deep defensive feelings of resentment against forces that they perceive to be alien and hostile in one colonial form or another for a very long time, forces that have often supported the fundamentalists when it suited their political agendas.

This second layer of internal clash within Islam is a vital factor in understanding the scope for a secular Islam. There can be no scope for secularism if this conflict in the hearts of moderate Muslims is not resolved in one direction rather than another – that is, if they do not find a way to overcome these defensive feelings of resentment. Without overcoming them, they will not be able to take the creative and assertive steps necessary to oppose the absolutists – and no amount of democratization of Muslim societies will help to subdue the fundamentalists unless the moderates are confident enough to launch that opposition.

There is no space here to elaborate in any detail what it would take to overcome such a defensive cast of mind. But it is a form of convenient and self-serving obtuseness on our part to think, as some do, that addressing the issues that give rise to this defensive resentment is irrelevant and unnecessary. It is perhaps true that it will not affect the fundamentalists to address these issues – but even that is questionable, since they (including Osama bin Laden) have openly declared that these issues are central to them.

But, in any case, it is not primarily the fundamentalist who needs to be addressed. It is the far more ubiquitous moderate who needs to be convinced that criticizing his own people and his own stultifying silence in the presence of shrill revivalist Islamic voices is not simply the handing over of ultimate victory to forces of long-standing external domination. The cruelty of wars, of bombings, of occupations, of expansionist settlements, of embargoes and sanctions, of support of corrupt elites, does nothing to convince them of this, does nothing to give them the necessary confidence – nor does the often transparently exploitative pursuit of Western corporate interests in these regions. They only encourage and increase the defensiveness.

It is extraordinary that humane and intelligent people do not see this quite obvious point. Even someone like Salman Rushdie, who has come around to saying that his brilliant, irreverent writings about Islam were intended not to
governments that have suppressed their people politically and economically in Iran under the Shah, in Saudi Arabia, in Egypt – these are all irrelevant issues. Muslims may say that these things are relevant, but that is all a veneer of false political rhetoric on top of the real underlying cause of the problem: their religious fanaticism. And even if they think that these things are relevant, even that is false; it is false consciousness. At bottom, all that is crucial is that Islam has bred fanaticism, and addressing all these issues will not help at all with that.” It’s not hard to see that it is a short step from this view of things to conclude that nothing will help but ‘shock and awe.’ This attitude is more than just self-serving or obtuse; it is a form of impertinence, as all such charges of false consciousness are, because it makes claims to having more insight into people’s motivations than the people themselves have.

The clash within civilizations
merely ridicule the fundamentalist conception of Islam but also to give encouragement to the moderate Muslim opposition to the fundamentalist, goes on to support two wars that have done everything possible to undermine any motivation that a moderate might have in forging that opposition.

But all this is to take up matters that are current and controversial, and I did not want this essay to be primarily polemical. The diagnostic points I am making are much more general. To put them in summary, I have been arguing: 1) that there is an implicit clash within Islamic societies between moderate and fundamentalist Muslims, and sheer arithmetic suggests that democratization (including intracommunity democratization) in Muslim societies will help end this clash in a secular direction; and 2) that resolving a second, quite different sort of clash by paying humane attention to the very specific sort of internal moral and psychological conflict that the moderate Muslim faces may be a necessary and prior condition for resolving the clash between secularists and fundamentalists.

Why is it that political positions such as Huntington’s and Hitchens’s are blind to these more subtle clashes, which should be the basis of any effort to defuse the more portentous clash that they predict?

I suspect it is because of a line of thought that goes something like this: Populations that identify themselves with Islam could not possibly resolve these clashes along these lines, because to do so would be to give up on that identification with Islam, to give up on Muslim identity.

As I said at the outset, if these conflicts were resolved in the ways I think possible, then moderate but nevertheless religious Muslims would have to oppose the fundamentalists and therefore relinquish some aspects of their religion. They would have to relinquish certain ideas about relations to non-Muslims, ideas about gender relations in institutions such as marriage, divorce, alimony, etc., and commitments to censorship and punishment of blasphemy. But to do so, it will be said, would be to give up on one’s Muslim identity, to cease to see oneself as a Muslim.

This line of thought is based on a numbingly false picture of cultural identity that fundamentalists would like to encourage. But a person’s identity is not given by a checklist, such that if every item is not checked off one loses one’s identity. Identity is simply not a codified phenomenon in that way. It is fluid and malleable and survives enormous amounts of revision and erosion, as we all know even from Muslim societies in many parts of the world today. The idea that if one gives up a Shariah law about blasphemy or alimony, or even a customary religious practice such as purdah, that one is ceasing to be a Muslim altogether is an egregious misrepresentation of what it takes to be a Muslim. I know any number of Muslims, not déracinés like me but religious people, whom it would be a travesty to count as anything but Muslims, and who have altogether shed these offending convictions and practices. To say that they don’t count as having Muslim identity is to assume a conception that only an absolutist would affirm. Huntington and Hitchens, therefore, should worry a bit that their views here are too perfectly of a piece with the absolutist’s.

Since there is scope for misunderstanding here, it is important to state that the point I have just made about identity not being codifiable should not be confused with the quite different and
The clash within civilizations

much more glib idea of what is sometimes called ‘hybridity’ or ‘multiple identities.’ There is a tendency, mostly in contemporary literary theory, to say that in a world of postcoloniality and large-scale immigration, there are no identities, only cultural flux that dissolves notions such as ‘self’ and identification with religion and other forms of cultural belonging.

Of course, the idea that we all have multiple identities is a banality. Who can deny it? But it’s not an idea that could possibly overturn the plain fact that in many historical and social contexts, for quite specifiable functional reasons, some of these multiple identities loom much larger for us than others, and abide for much longer than others. What makes the picture of constant flux and hybridity (or, to use Salman Rushdie’s wonderful word ‘chutneyfication’) so implausible is that it cannot accommodate this plain fact, and actually finds it theoretically misguided to try to do so.

The notion I am invoking is not hybridity at all, but a lack of codification in one’s understanding of identity, which can allow for revision of commitments and values without the necessary loss of identity. The only thing that such an idea shares with hybridity is the negative goal of repudiating the essentialism of primordial and immutable conceptions of identity. But to achieve this goal, it posits not some postmodern conception of an incoherent psyche produced by immigrant or postcolonial experience, but rather a quite different neo-Hegelian idea – of a psyche informed by an internal conflict of values. These conflicts, which are engendered by historical or even sometimes by personal encounters, do not altogether dissolve notions of self and identity. Rather, they become the occasion for a community’s (or individual’s) internal deliberation and negotia-

But to return from these more theoretical reflections to the central point of this paper, which they are intended to make possible: There is much scope for Muslims retaining their identity as Muslims, even as they de facto shed this or that aspect of their faith. It has already happened in many parts of the world. That is to say, there is much scope for them to acquire an increasing and cumulative secularism even within their commitment to Islam. But they will find it very hard to do so if we do not cease to gear our rhetoric and political agendas to the ideal of a ‘clash of civilizations,’ and focus instead on these clashes within Islamic civilization itself.

Americans, unlike the citizens of other prosperous democracies, not to mention those of poor countries, do not seem to care much about inequality. One might think that our attitude toward it must sooner or later change—especially now that the newspapers are filled with stories of the money and perquisites CEOs have extracted from their companies. But even after the Enron and other scandals, most Americans remain apathetic about inequality: What we have today is outrage against those who do not play fair—not outrage over inequality as such. In recent surveys, furthermore, Americans have named the state of the economy, terrorism, and education—but not inequality—as the most important issues facing the nation.

In a way, this is surprising. After all, the United States is the most unequal of the economically developed countries—and that inequality has been increasing. If Americans don’t care about inequality, it obviously isn’t because inequality doesn’t exist here.

One could argue that they don’t care about inequality because the poor do pretty well in America, if one looks at measures of consumption rather than income. And in this vein one could argue that while Americans don’t care about inequality, they do care about poverty and have provided an adequate ‘safety net’ to protect against impoverishment. But the presence in the United States of the homeless, beggars, soup kitchens, and the like does not suggest great concern for the poor. In fact, the United States does much less than European countries to redistribute income to the worse-off. According to the OECD, transfers and other social benefits (which we may assume go mostly from people with more income to people with less income, though that is not uniformly the case) amounted in 1999 to 11 percent of GDP in the United States and 18 percent of GDP in the countries of the European Union, with a range among the larger European nations from 20 percent in Germany and France to 16 percent in the United Kingdom. The United States is particularly deficient in family benefits and unemployment and labor-market programs—1 percent of GDP for these, against 5 percent in the European Union and a whopping 8 percent in Sweden. The United States also lags behind in old-age, disability, and survivor’s benefits—7 percent versus 12 percent in the European Union.

These differences also extend to the treatment of the working poor, making it difficult to sustain the argument that Americans do care about the condition of the poor but make a distinction between the working and the non-working.

---

Nathan Glazer, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1969, has written extensively on issues of ethnicity and race in American society. He is professor of sociology and education emeritus at Harvard University.
poor. The legal minimum wage in the United States in the early 1990s was 39 percent of the average wage, as against 53 percent in the European Union. And our unemployment benefits are below that of most EU countries. Only the United Kingdom matches us in miserliness – but in the United Kingdom one may get these benefits for four years, as against six months in the United States. Notoriously, the United States does not require employers to provide any paid vacations, while European countries mandate on average four weeks – France and Sweden, five. The contrast between American and European family benefits is also striking. European family benefits (payments for each child, which do not exist in the United States) are for all: the state offers such aid as a means of strengthening the nation. (One wonders whether such benefits will maintain their popularity as the immigrant and Muslim populations in the European welfare states expand. A visiting Norwegian economist notes in conversation the large families of Pakistani immigrants in Norway who can live, without working, on family benefits, and who continue to receive these benefits if they return to Pakistan. Even the model services of the Scandinavian countries may be strained by such developments.)

Recently two important studies have helped us to think about the puzzling difference between European and American attitudes toward poverty and inequality. One is a long paper by three economists – Albert Alesina, Edward Glaeser, and Bruce Sacerdote – titled “Why Doesn’t the United States have a European-Style Welfare State?” (published in 2001 in the *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*), from which most of the facts given above have been taken. The other is a book by Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (2001).

Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote assert that the American pattern of a small government and a smaller welfare state has deep historical roots: “From the very beginning of the expansion of the public sector in the late 19th century, the United States and Europe show very distinctive patterns.... [T]he absolute difference grew as the welfare state expanded both in Europe and the US....” This makes it difficult to explain the current pattern by recent political events such as the Reagan administration. This is not to exclude the political factors that affect inequality and poverty and the size of the welfare state, which would be silly, but it does remind us that there may be large, historically rooted factors that operate independently of given administrations and their philosophies.

What then are these factors? According to Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote, they could be aspects of the American economy, of the American political system, or of something else. They use the term ‘behavioral’ to characterize this ‘something else’ – those noneconomic and nonpolitical factors that may explain why the United States is divergent. (I would call such factors ‘social’ or ‘cultural.’)

The authors begin by deploying an economic model to compare the United States with European countries. Despite its formidable mathematical form, their model operates on some simple assumptions: that economic factors will affect the self-interested political decisions of people, and that these in turn will affect the policies of government in a democracy. What this model shows is that Americans, unlike Europeans, do not act as much on the basis of direct economic
self-interest: even though inequality is greater in America than in Europe, Americans are less inclined than Europeans to demand energetic governmental action to redistribute income from the well-off to the less well-off.

So why don’t Americans vote for more government action against inequality? One possible explanation is that there is more social mobility in the United States than in Europe, so if those with less income expect that in time they will have more, they may be less concerned with the protection provided by a true safety net – that is, a developed welfare state.

The evidence on whether there is actually more social mobility in the United States than in Europe is unclear – surprisingly enough, it has been unclear since Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix began studying the question forty years ago. But whatever the facts about social mobility, it is clear that the beliefs about social mobility are very different in the United States from what they are in Europe: Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote report, using the World Values Survey, that “71% of Americans, but only 40% of Europeans, believe that the poor have a chance to escape from poverty.”

After their consideration of economic factors, which explain little, and political factors, which explain more (because of our complex political arrangements – think of the electoral college), Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote come to their ‘behavioral’ factors. Here they regard one as decisive, far outranking any others in their various regressions: the racial factor. A cross-country comparison relates social spending to a measure of ‘racial fractionalization,’ and a cross-state comparison in the United States relates the percentage of blacks in a state to the size of the welfare benefit. Race seems decisive in explaining indifference to inequality.

At the same time, they remark on certain regnant beliefs that seem to me equally compelling here, and not at all easy to disentangle from racial prejudice: “Opinions and beliefs about the poor differ sharply between the United States and Europe. In Europe the poor are generally thought to be unfortunate, but not personally responsible for their own condition. For example, according to the World Values Survey, whereas 70% of West Germans express the belief that people are poor because of imperfections in society, not their own laziness, 70% of Americans hold the opposite view ….” Recall that Americans believe, and Europeans don’t, that the poor can work their way out of poverty.

The poor, from other evidence, seem to share in these distinctively American beliefs. According to Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote, work patterns in the United States seem coherent with this belief: there is a strong positive correlation between earnings and hours worked. People in the top quintile in the United States work longer hours than people in the middle quintiles, and people in the lowest quintile work much fewer hours. If you work more in the United States, you are less likely to be poor. Patterns in Europe are different. In Sweden, all work the same number of hours. In Italy and Switzerland, the poor work longer hours. Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote note, too, that there is a relation between the belief that luck determines income and the amount of social spending in a country. The United States spends the lowest amount on social welfare and also has the lowest percentage of people who believe that luck determines income. In other words: when people are impoverished, Americans
don’t chalk it up to ‘bad luck’ – they rather assume the poor are responsible, in large part, for their poverty.

Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote’s bottom line: “Americans redistribute less than Europeans for three reasons: because the majority of Americans believe that redistribution favors racial minorities, because Americans believe that they live in an open and fair society, and that if someone is poor it is his or her own fault, and because the political system is geared toward preventing redistribution. In fact the political system is likely to be endogenous to these basic American beliefs.” In effect, we have the political system we do because we prefer its results – such as limiting redistribution to blacks.

Lipset and Marks agree on the role of beliefs and the importance of the political system in explaining American attitudes toward inequality. But they give much less attention to the racial factor, incorporating it into the larger theme of the ethnic and racial diversity of the American working class, one of the many factors that has been noted in the century-old discussion of why there is no large socialist party in the United States.

I do believe the specific racial factor that emerges so sharply in the regression analysis of Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote has to be acknowledged. But I also believe it is linked to the larger structure of American diversity, in religion, in ethnicity, and that it is this larger structure that is the key factor in shaping the American welfare state.

We can see the effects of this distinctively American diversity and its impact on the provision of welfare more than two hundred fifty years ago, when the increasing sectarian divisions in the original colonies began to affect the welfare institutions of the New England colonists; one hundred fifty years ago, when the incoming Catholic Irish created their own welfare institutions; one hundred years ago, when we saw similar institutions created by Jewish, Italian, and other immigrants.

What originally had been institutions created by the state or established religions in the early colonies, following the patterns of Europe, were broken up and privatized under the impact of increasing religious and ethnic diversity. And so Harvard College, founded as an institution of higher education by the Bay State Colony and its established religion, mutated into a private and independent institution, no longer supported or governed by the state or by a dominant religion. The establishment of what might have become in time a uniform state public educational system was broken by the immigration of the Catholic Irish. The new immigrants were cared for in large measure by their own religion-based social welfare institutions.

In the United States, the government began late making provisions for those affected by the industrializing society, and never fully replaced religious groups and other nongovernment charitable institutions in providing social welfare. Of course, this network of institutions still exists and is very extensive. Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote give us the astonishing estimate that charitable contributions in the United States in 2000 amounted to $691 per capita, compared to $141 in the United Kingdom and $57 in Europe as a whole.

So where do blacks factor in? The situation of African Americans was indeed different. No other ethnic group in the United States had to face anything like the conditions of slavery, or the fierce subsequent prejudice and segregation to which blacks were subjected. And the preexisting conditions of fractionated
social services affected them too. Like other groups, they established their own churches, which provided some services, within the limits set by their prevailing poverty. Like other groups, too, they turned to preexisting systems of social service.

Owing to their economic condition, African Americans were much more dependent on America’s primitive public services, and in time they became the special ward of the American welfare state. Having become, to a greater extent than other groups, the clients of public services, they affected, owing to the prevailing racism, the public image of these services.

But there is something more than race and diversity that shapes our characteristic system of beliefs – something distinctly American, connected to our founding values as a pioneer society created by English settlers. Lipset and Marks place great weight on these initial founding values.

What is English or Scottish or Welsh or Scotch-Irish, and what is Calvinist or Presbyterian or Anglican, in our founding would be very difficult to sort out. Still, there is a distinctive pattern of values we see in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States, and that we can also discern to some extent in the other settler societies founded by the English, centered on the belief in effort and merit and opportunity as against egalitarian provision by the state. We can see this pattern in public opinion polls. The United Kingdom lags behind Europe on most measures of inequality and redistribution, and it also places more blame on the poor.

In sum, a satisfying answer to the puzzle of America’s relative indifference to inequality must, I think, consider a number of factors: common institutional origins in the British Isles; the impact of religious diversity and immigration; a greater faith in equal opportunity than in government-established equality – all have played a role in shaping American attitudes. The racial factor is important, too.

All this, and our distinctively complex political structure, has produced great inequality in the United States – and there is no evidence that Americans today want it otherwise.