

Chapter 1

Introduction

Both the substance and the structure of this book are captured in its title: it is an account of the relative religiousness of America and secularity of Europe and has a theme and variations. The *theme* of Eurosecularity is announced in an opening essay (Chapter 2) which introduces the comparison with the United States. The *variations* (four of them) are developed in the more detailed analyses that follow, each of which elaborates a particular line of argument. Quite apart from its content, the book is distinctive in the sense that it has three starting points and three authors. The ‘threes’, however, are somewhat differently constituted. The following paragraphs explain these various factors. The starting points are outlined first, then the book’s contents. Once the contents are in place, each author and his or her particular responsibilities will be introduced.

Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations should be seen first as an output from a project on European Secularity held under the auspices of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs at Boston University.¹ This project supported three workshops, held in Berlin between 2001 and 2003, with the cooperation of the Protestant Academy in Berlin. Each of these meetings gathered a distinguished group of specialists from all parts of Europe and beyond. The aim of the project was to understand better the exceptional nature of Europe’s religious life compared with the trends in religion that are discovered elsewhere in the world. The deliberations of these meetings have informed the pages that follow.

A second stimulus can be found in the ideas set out in Grace Davie’s *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (2002), to which this book is in some respects a sequel. *Europe: The Exceptional Case* examines the religious life of Europe from the outside, comparing this with five other examples of Christianity (the United States, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, South Korea, and the Philippines)—asking in each case why the European trajectory is so different from most parts of the modern world, even the Christian world, in its comparative secularity. The present volume represents both a broadening and deepening of this idea, developing the argument in thematic rather than geographical terms.

More precisely, it draws out the comparison between Europe and the United States,² asking how two economically advanced societies, or groups of societies, can be so different in terms of their religious dimensions. Here the point of departure lies in the article prepared by Peter Berger (2005) for *The National Interest*, which has become Chapter 2 of this volume.³ The questions that it poses are timely—and becoming more so almost by the day—given the on-going discussion about the unity/disunity of the West that dominates much of the political debate. The religious factor is central to these discussions, and is increasingly acknowledged as such. The latter remark is significant in itself: the recognition of religion as a credible and independent variable in both public debate and in the analyses of social science cannot be taken for granted. Its recent restoration after a long absence forms a core idea in the chapters that follow.

The notion of Eurosecularity unites these three initiatives. It also reverses what might be termed the “classical” perspective—that which assumed that European links between modernization and secularization were the model for the “rest of the world.” This assumption, that is, the idea of an *organic* link between modernization and secularization, has dominated sociological thinking for the past 150 years—effectively since the beginnings of the discipline. Since 1970, however, it has been increasingly questioned. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the markedly different situation in the United States, the growth of Christianity in the southern hemisphere, the presence of Pentecostalism all over the developing world, the affirmation of Islam in global affairs, increasingly heated debates for and against proselytism, and so on have prompted scholars of many disciplines to rethink the secularization paradigm as it was inspired by the European case and to question the assumptions on which it was built.

The number of books on this topic grows steadily as scholars revise their views on secularization. Jenkins (2002) offers an excellent example: what Jenkins calls *The Next Christendom* will not be found in the northern hemisphere, but in the global south. Indeed even the relatively buoyant statistics of religion in the United States pale into insignificance compared with the exponential growth of Christianity in the developing world, a phenomenon which (following Jenkins) eclipses even the much talked about expansion of Islam in the late twentieth century.⁴ Relatively few of these analyses, however, are concerned primarily with a better understanding of the European case and why it is markedly different from the rest of the world.⁵ This question—seen through the prism of a detailed comparison with the United States—is the principal goal of this volume.

The task is highly topical: the nature and development of Europe is central to public discussion. With this in mind it is essential that we

develop a proper and fully European awareness of the historical evolution of which modern Europe is the product. A European writing of this history will reveal both its unity compared with the rest of the world and its internal complexity, once the very different histories of the constituent nations are taken into account. Religion is integral to this process, though Europeans are frequently surprised to discover this. Hence the vehemence of the reactions whenever religion encroaches on the public sphere in Europe. The furore surrounding the possible mention of religion in the preamble to the much debated European Constitution is a case in point. The presence of Islam raises similar issues. Indeed in many respects Islam has become the crucial catalyst—one that provokes Europeans to rethink the place of religion within Europe as well as outside. Similar issues are raised by the question of Turkish accession to the European Union. All of these illustrations will be examined in detail in the pages that follow.

It is clear, finally, that a different religious *formation* (to use the French term) leads to different visions of the world, different ways of thinking, and different sensibilities towards a whole range of issues—economic, political, cultural, and philosophical as well as religious. Nowhere is this more evident than in the current misunderstandings between Europe and the United States. The essential point is easily summarized: Europeans think that there is altogether too much religion in the United States, which has a dangerous effect on policy; Americans in turn are taken aback by Europe's secularity. Our aim is to throw light on these exchanges, appreciating that their origins very frequently lie in the different nature of religion in either case—and in so doing to contribute not only to a better understanding of the European situation, but to a more constructive transatlantic dialogue.

Hence the structure of the book. It is, as we have already indicated, a theme and variations. Chapter 2 contains the theme, which itself is divided into two sections. The first articulates the very different patterns of religious life that exist in Europe and the United States, bearing in mind that there are similarities as well as differences. The second follows naturally: why do these differences exist? What are the reasons for the very different trajectories of religious life in two undeniably developed parts of the world? Seven possibilities emerge: differences in church–state relationships; questions of pluralism; different understandings of the Enlightenment; different types of intellectuals; variations in culture and how this is understood; institutional contrasts (how in concrete terms the Enlightenment and associated cultures are sustained); and differences in the ways that religious organizations relate to indices of social difference (notably class and ethnicity).

In the chapters that follow, these explanations are grouped into the four variations, each of which begins from the ideas set out in Chapter 2. Effectively, however, these become a set of independent essays, each of which acquires a life of its own, developing the core ideas in different ways—the argument that emerges does not always concur with the initial statement or explanation. The most substantial “disagreements” concern the role of education in the secularization of European societies and the future of religion on the continent as a whole. An internal dialogue begins to emerge.

Chapter 3, for example, examines the different arrangements of church and state in Europe and the United States, bearing in mind the considerable diversity within Europe as well as the trans-Atlantic contrasts. Careful attention is paid to the different “presence” of religion in either case: in Europe, the existence of a state church or its successor (still a quasi-monopoly in many cases); in the United States, a seemingly limitless number of denominations. Both are explained by a distinctive history which requires detailed examination. Within these histories, the territorial embedding of the European churches, together with their relationships to power, becomes a crucial theme, the more so given its absence in the United States. The implications of both models for the continuing vitality of religion in the present period follows from this; so too do the consequences of increasing religious diversity found on both sides of the Atlantic. At the same time the chapter poses a question: are the patterns of religion in Europe becoming more like those in the United States? And what might be the consequences if they do?

Chapter 4 concerns culture rather than structure. The different understandings of the Enlightenment form the core of the argument, which draws amongst other things on Himmelfarb’s recent writing. More precisely, the chapter asks how the essentially French idea of “freedom from belief” mutated as it crossed the Atlantic into a “freedom to believe”—and what are the steps or stopping places along the way? One point becomes immediately clear: even in Europe there are marked variations in how the Enlightenment was understood and how the epistemological shift that the Enlightenment represented related to the dominant religious tradition. France and Britain, for example, offer sharply different illustrations. The second part of the chapter examines this point from a different perspective, looking in particular at secular elites and how they have reacted to the presence of religion, not least its recent reappearance in public discussion. The latter point is interesting: as religion reaffirms its influence in the modern world, there is a need to revisit the secular philosophies that underpin modern political thinking. The difference between high and low culture is central to this discussion.

Different versions of the Enlightenment and different reactions to the presence of religion do not exist in a vacuum. They are carried in a range of institutions, some of which are created for the task and some of which find themselves co-opted, willingly or not. Chapter 5 deals with these institutions. Contrasting understandings of the state provide an obvious point of departure, an institution which in itself is differently conceived in Europe and America. This point needs to be grasped for its own sake, quite apart from its relationship to religion in all its manifestations. State churches, for example, imply a particular—essentially European—perception of the state, without which they cannot exist. Equally important are the institutions responsible for both making and interpreting the law, a complex and continuing process which takes place differently in Europe and the United States. So far at least, there is no equivalent in Europe to the American Supreme Court, which merits very careful attention. So too do the individuals appointed to it.

Within these overarching frameworks, education emerges as a very significant conduit for religious ideas—sometimes as a carrier of the dominant religious tradition, other times of its alter ego. Clearly there are sharp differences within Europe in this respect quite apart from continental contrasts—hence, to some extent, the different points of view expressed in this volume. Increasingly, the organization of health and welfare forms part of the same discussion—the more so given the pressures on the care-systems of all advanced economies as demographic changes take their toll. Faith-based welfare, for instance, quite clearly exists on both sides of the Atlantic (as indeed do faith schools), but the discourse is different in each place. This rhetoric needs careful examination. A parallel theme can be found in the relationship between modern welfare institutions and their religious antecedents. The latter, including their associated theologies, condition the former—sometimes directly, sometime less so.

The final variation (Chapter 6) scrutinizes the links between religion and social difference. At the same time it continues the preceding discussion in that it introduces, albeit briefly, two further institutional carriers: first political parties and their relationship to social class (especially in Europe), and second the family and its role in the transmission, or otherwise, of religious ideas. The chapter starts, however, with social difference per se, recognizing that all societies mark this in one way or another—subtleties that are not easily translatable (multiple misunderstandings occur, some amusing and some more serious). Religion is implicated in these niceties, a point that becomes immediately clear in the anecdote in Chapter 2 about the dentist. The patient in this case was indicating his ability to pay a bill; the dentist was bewildered by the reference to religion as a proxy for financial security (see pp. 20–21). In the variation relating to these issues,

special attention will be paid to the connections between religion and social class, and between religion and ethnicity. The increasing diversity in both Europe and the United States will be integral to this discussion—a topic which raises one of the most urgent political issues of the day: that of immigration. The final sections of this chapter turn, however, in a different direction; they look in detail at age (an increasingly important variable in modern societies) and gender. Here, interestingly, the similarities are as important as the differences. In practically every part of the Christian West, women are more religious than men and older people more religious than the young. The latter relationship, however, displays some interesting details, which differ not only between the continents but in different European societies.

Understanding the place of religion in both Europe and the United States is clearly an end in itself, but it is also a means to an end. More concretely a whole set of policy implications arise from this way of working, some of which have been referred to along the way. These will be gathered up in Chapter 7. They include, on the one hand, a wide range of domestic policies regarding religion as such, in both the private and the public sphere—policies, for example, that concern religious diversity, pluralism, and tolerance (and the difficult relationships between these). The American and European cases are very different in this respect, a contrast nicely captured in the following question: is religion part of the problem or part of the solution? Europeans are inclined towards the former possibility, Americans towards the latter. A number of external policies are also addressed, which themselves can be divided into different groups: those which relate to the building of Europe itself—notably the question of enlargement (including the case of Turkey); those which relate to the relationships between Europe and the United States, and the particular place of Britain within this; and those, finally, which relate to the attitudes of both Europe and the United States to the increasingly prominent place of religion in the modern world. Integral to the whole chapter is the notion of “alternate” or “multiple” modernities, a way of working which in itself has huge policy implications for the Western as well as the non-Western world.

The final section of this chapter collects the threads together, reposing the crucial theoretical issue which can be summarized as follows: is Europe secular because it is modern, or is Europe secular because it is European? That in turn opens up the issue of modernity itself and its relationship to secularity. In short: is secularization intrinsic or extrinsic to the modernization process? If Europe is secular because it is modern, then modernization and secularization acquire an organic link. If Europe is secular because it is European, then the reasoning becomes quite different.

In light of the material presented in this book, we conclude that the latter is the much more likely option.

Who then are the authors? The first is Peter Berger, Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs in Boston. The Institute is a research center committed to the systematic study of relationships between economic development and socio-cultural change in different parts of the world. A better understanding of religion is central to this enterprise. The second is Grace Davie, Professor of Sociology at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom and until recently the Director of Exeter's Centre for European Studies. In 2006, she completed a four-year term as President of Research Committee 22 (Sociology of Religion) of the International Sociological Association. The third is Effie Fokas, currently based in the European Institute of the London School of Economics and the director of the LSE Forum on Religion. Doctor Fokas is also the program manager of 'Welfare and Values in Europe', a project funded by the European Commission's Sixth Framework, and a research associate of ELIAMEP (the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy) in Athens.

We are co-authors. All of us have read and fully endorse the book as a whole. Certain divergences in perspective are however recognized, and—where appropriate—are indicated in the text. Within this framework, Berger has been primarily responsible for Chapter 2 (which started life as a single authored article), Davie for Chapters 1, 4, and 6, and Fokas for Chapters 3 and 5. All of us have contributed at some point to Chapter 7. Mutual encouragement has been an integral part of our work.

Notes

- 1 See: <http://www.bu.edu/cura/about/introduction.html> (accessed 6 May 2008) for more details about the life and work of the Institute.
- 2 Canada, of course, is different again, and is not part of the following discussion. An excellent summary of the Canadian case can be found in Lyon and Van Die (2000).
- 3 The version reproduced here is the preliminary version; that published was a little different. We are grateful to *The National Interest* for permission to republish this piece.
- 4 Much of this work concerns the renewed assertion of Islam in global politics. The debate surrounding Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1998) is a case in point.
- 5 Philip Jenkins's *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (2007), is a welcome exception. Published shortly before this book went to press, it introduces a number of themes covered in more detail in the following chapters.