

Crediting God

SOVEREIGNTY AND RELIGION IN THE
AGE OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Edited by

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PART FOUR

The Religion of Democracy: Tocqueville Beyond Civil Religion

CHAPTER 13

The Religious Situation in the United States 175 Years After Tocqueville

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In *Democracy in America* there is a passage in which Tocqueville clearly states what he takes to be the real relation between religion and freedom, and it is only appropriate to begin by citing it:

Eighteenth-century philosophers had a very simple explanation for the gradual weakening of beliefs. Religious zeal, they said, was bound to die down as enlightenment and freedom spread. It is tiresome that the facts do not fit this theory at all . . .

In America the most free and enlightened people in the world zealously perform all the external duties of religion.

The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States. The longer I stayed in the country, the more conscious I became of the important political consequences resulting from this novel situation.

In France I had seen the spirits of religion and of freedom almost always marching in opposite directions. In America I found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land.

My longing to understand the reason for this phenomenon increased daily.

To find this out, I questioned the faithful of all communions . . . all thought that the main reason for the quiet sway of religion over their

country was the complete separation of church and state. I have no hesitation in stating that throughout my stay in America I met nobody, lay or cleric, who did not agree about that.¹

One can derive four basic propositions from this lengthy quotation. First, Tocqueville is one of the few modern social theorists, William James and Vilfredo Pareto being perhaps the only two others, who did not share the basic premises of the theory of secularization, which the social sciences adopted uncritically from the Enlightenment critique of religion. The basic premise of all versions of the theory of secularization, which until very recently had attained the status of an uncontested paradigm within all social sciences, and particularly in my own discipline sociology, was that the more "modern" a society the more "secular" it will be, that religious beliefs and practices will tend to decline in modern societies, and that religious institutions and norms will tend to become an increasingly marginalized, privatized and publicly irrelevant social phenomenon. Originally, as seen by Tocqueville's response, it was either the advancement of knowledge, science, mass literacy, and secular education, in a word, Enlightenment, or the advancement of liberal democracy and political freedoms, which were allegedly responsible for the decline of religion. Later theories placed greater emphasis either on indicators of economic modernization, such as economic well-being and the expansion of the welfare state or on more abstract theories of functional differentiation and expansion of the secular spheres at the expense of an equally differentiated but greatly diminished religious one.

Second, in America Tocqueville found empirical confirmation of his doubts concerning the Enlightenment assumptions about the future of religion. Like so many other European visitors, Tocqueville was immediately struck by the vitality of religion in America and by the "innumerable multitude of sects" he found there. Today we would talk instead of an innumerable multitude of "denominations." But in Tocqueville's times, although he already observed the phenomenon, neither the name nor the theory of "denominationalism" as the great American institutional religious invention had yet been discovered or formulated.² Tocqueville visited the United States in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, precisely at the time when denominationalism as the American religious system of free, voluntary, pluralistic, competitive, and formally equal religious denominations was becoming institutionalized and as the churching of the American population was taking off.³ Unlike so many later European visitors and professional observers who tended to minimize or

explain away the relevance of this phenomenon by referring to "American exceptionalism," as if the vitality of religion in America was simply the exception that confirmed the general rule of European secularization, Tocqueville saw it clearly as a "novel" situation, that is, as the product of modern developments and not simply as a traditional residue that was eventually bound to disappear with progressive modernization.

Third, seeking an explanation for the extraordinary religious vitality and religious pluralism, Tocqueville found it in the "complete separation of church and state," an explanation that Karl Marx will borrow from Tocqueville when in his essay "On the Jewish Question" he characterizes the United States paradoxically as a model of "perfect disestablishment" and as "the land of religiosity par excellence," an explanation, moreover, that as Tocqueville himself indicated was taken for granted as a truism by every ordinary American, lay or cleric, in the 1830s. It would take another century and a half for sociologists of religion in America to rediscover this basic explanation and turn it into a new American paradigm, but now embellished with the problematic claims of being a scientific theory of general universal validity for all times and places, on the basis of a very questionable utilitarian rational choice theory of human action and of a reductionist supply-side theory of religious markets. What is indisputable is that the uniquely American pattern of separation of church and state codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, namely "free exercise of religion" and "no establishment," created the institutional structural conditions for the emergence of "denominationalism" as a uniquely American religious system. Eventually, all religions in America, churches as well as sects, Christian and non-Christian, irrespective of their origins, doctrinal claims and ecclesiastical-organizational identities, will turn into congregational "denominations," formally equal and competing in a relatively free, pluralistic and voluntaristic religious system. But unlike contemporary American supply-side theorists of religious markets who are primarily interested in the competitive internal dynamics of growth and decline of religious firms within a supposedly differentiated and self-regulated free religious market, Tocqueville was much more interested in the institutional structural features of the denominational model and its elective affinities and effects on modern individualism, on the voluntary associationism of civil society and on the political system of American democracy as a whole.

Fourth, Tocqueville indeed makes clear that despite the evident privatization of religion, the denominational religious system had "important political consequences," pointing out that in America the spirit of religion

and freedom, instead of marching in opposite direction as in France, were intimately linked together. Clearly, for Tocqueville the separation of church and state did not mean the separation of religion and politics, and as he indicates in another passage "religion, which never intervenes directly in the government of American society should (still) be considered as the first of their political institutions."⁴

Religion, according to Tocqueville, contributes powerfully to the maintenance of American democracy at three levels:

1. At the individual level, religion offers the modern individual a form of self-transcendence, a way of transcending solipsist privatistic individualism by turning the individual toward public affairs and by applying the doctrine of self-interest properly understood to religion. "Not only do the Americans practice their religion out of self-interest, but they often even place in this world the interest which they have in practicing it."⁵

2. At the organizational-institutional level, religion is a form of voluntary association. The religious congregation, for Tocqueville, is the prototype of all voluntary associations of American civil society, and civil associations in turn are schools of democracy that pave the way for political associations, which on their part expand further the techniques and the purposes for more and wider association in a sort of virtuous circle, so that, according to Tocqueville, "when they (citizens) are allowed to combine freely for all purposes, they come in the end to think of association as the universal, one might almost say the only, means by which men can attain their various aims."⁶

3. Finally, at the societal level, despite the innumerable multitude of sects and their internal religious differences, religion in America contributes most to democracy by teaching the same habits of the heart, by propagating similar public opinions and by inculcating the same mores. According to Tocqueville, all religious denominations in America tend to "agree concerning the duties of men to one another," all tend to "preach the same morality in the name of God," and also tend to agree that most important for society is "not that all citizens should profess the true religion but that they should profess religion." After examining the tendency of Catholics in America to become democratic and republican, thus belying the widespread assumption in his own France that Catholicism was "a natural enemy of democracy," Tocqueville arrived at the conclusion that "there is not a single religious doctrine in the United States hostile to democratic and republican institutions. All the clergy there speak the same language; opinions are in harmony with the laws,

and there is, so to say, only one mental current." Moreover, he adds, all Americans think that religion is "necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions. That is not the view of one class or party among the citizens, but of the whole nation."⁷ Without yet having a name for it, Tocqueville was clearly describing what later would be called the "American civil religion," a religion which while being disestablished, having no ecclesiastical institutional form, and being different from any particular denomination was shared, as Will Herberg would point out, by all denominations in America, "Protestant, Catholic and Jew."⁸

Thus, by tying his explanation of the striking pluralism and vitality of religion in America to a historical theory of modern individualism, to a historical theory of modern civil society, and to a historical theory of modern civil religion, Tocqueville offers a more persuasive explanatory institutional theory of the unique vitality of the very particular American system of religious denominationalism, than contemporary supply-side theories of the American religious market that are based on dubious anthropological presuppositions of a single and universal type of rational human action based on the utilitarian calculation of costs and benefits; on an ahistorical theory of religious markets according to which the demand for religious commodities is universally constant, what changes is the supply along with changes in the level of regulation and free competition in the religious market; and on an ahistorical theory of a self-differentiated and self-regulated religious market which appears disembedded from the American state, from the legal-constitutional system, from the American nation, and from American culture, and is therefore a model which presumably can be exported to any society in the world or can naturally flourish once state regulation of religious markets disappears.

But even assuming that one finds persuasive my claim that Tocqueville offers a convincing explanation of the tremendous vitality and variety of American religion and of its important contribution to American democracy at least in the nineteenth century, one should raise the question whether the religious situation in America today remains basically the same as the one described by Tocqueville 175 years ago or whether instead American religion has not undergone in the meantime fundamental structural transformations. Furthermore, one should ask the additional and no less relevant question whether in the United States today "the spirits of religion and of freedom" are still found intimately linked together, or whether instead, as so many critics argue, a new form of illiberal "fundamentalist" religion does not reign politically over the land, a form of religion that is perhaps no longer contributing to maintaining freedom in

America and that is arguably contributing to culture wars that are dividing rather than uniting the nation, not to speak, of course, of the threats which the influence of such a religion on American imperial projects may pose to the rest of the world.

In this essay I would like to address both important questions by examining schematically the most important historical transformations of religion in America and by evaluating the contemporary religious situation in America at the individual level of analysis, at the level of associational-denominational religion, and at the level of national civil religion.

Individual Religiosity and Spirituality

It was Tocqueville who actually introduced the term "individualism" into the American discourse to express a new idea and a new condition, which as he indicated "is of democratic origin and threatens to grow as conditions get more equal," for, "in ages of equality, every man finds his beliefs within himself, and I shall now go on to show that all his feelings are turned in on himself."⁹ Thus, Tocqueville already points to the modern self as the experiential source and tabernacle of religious transcendence. But he still conceived of this modern religious force as being embedded in and channeled through organized religion. Moreover, organized religion still meant for him Christian religion for, as he observed, "all the sects in the United States belong to the great unity of Christendom."¹⁰

One will have to wait until the turn of the century to find the first compelling phenomenological analysis of the modern varieties of individual or "personal religion," in the work of William James, or its first typological classification in Ernst Troeltsch's concept of "individual mysticism" as a modern form of "spiritual religion," along with the two traditional types of organized religion, "the church" and "the sect."¹¹ One will have to wait even longer, until the 1960s, to observe the first mass expressions of what Thomas Luckmann will call "the invisible religion" of self-expression and self-realization, along with the triumph of the therapeutic.¹² Finally, it will be in the 1990s when all types of discourses and practices of pastoral self-care of the soul will become big business.¹³ By the end of the century an increasing number of Americans, roughly 20 percent, will reject organized "religion" in the name of a broader, eclectic, and more ecumenical "spirituality" that is supposed to offer a more sure and authentic path to the inner self and to the sacred. They form the new category of "spiritual but not religious."¹⁴ But one can safely assume that an even

larger number of Americans experience similar spiritual journeys while still belonging to traditional denominations or by joining all kinds of new religious communities.

Indeed, unlike the old world of monopolistic churches and sedentary territorial parishes throughout Europe, the United States always offered a fertile ground for free-floating and unaffiliated expressions of individualistic and autonomous religiosity along with, and often also inside, an ever proliferating number of congregations, denominations, and religious communities of all sorts that individual Americans could voluntarily join. At the time of independence, when a majority of Americans remained unchurched, large numbers of them could have agreed with Thomas Paine's expression, "My mind is my church," or with Thomas Jefferson's equally felicitous one, "I am a sect myself."¹⁵ Even if one was ready to dismiss such particular formulations as paradigmatic "high culture" Enlightenment expressions of individual religiosity, unlikely to be widespread among ordinary Americans, historians of American religion have documented the widespread reception of all kinds of popular religion, and of paranormal, occult, spiritual, and spiritualist practices that took place outside or on the margins of organized religion, in what Jon Butler has aptly characterized as the "Antebellum Spiritual Hothouse."¹⁶ The widespread reception of Freemasonry and Mesmerism of Swedenborgianism and Spiritualism, and the "occult" and "healing" connections of many of these elements, which one can trace at the origins of such typically "American" religious movements as Mormonism and Christian Science already presage the countercultural self-help and spiritual movements of the 1960s and the more recent counterreligious spirituality of the New Age.¹⁷ The profound resonance that the message of Swami Vivekananda, the global missionary of "Hindu spirituality," encountered in his visit to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and in his subsequent lecture tours across the United States already anticipates the impact that Eastern religions and Eastern mysticism were going to have on the new religious movements of the 1960s.¹⁸

These new religious movements and the radical individual and group experimentation that accompanied the counterculture of the 1960s, a phenomenon that was immediately characterized by observers as "a new religious consciousness" or as a "consciousness reformation," appeared so utterly "new" only because it emerged from and as a reaction to the most triumphantly orthodox, uncontested, and domineering run of organized denominational religion in American history.¹⁹ In retrospect, the dominance of organized denominational religion after World War II appears

as the extraordinary apex of a long process of gradual accretion of vast organizational infrastructural resources first by the main Protestant denominations and then by the new immigrant religions, American Catholicism and American Judaism. Robert Wuthnow, who has offered us both the most comprehensive study of the restructuring of organized American religion since World War II and the most insightful analysis of the transformation of American spirituality since the 1950s, has characterized this change structurally as organized religion's loss of monopoly over individual spiritual and religious practices and phenomenologically as the passage from collectively "dwelling in the House of the Lord" to "seeking new spiritual freedom within the inner self."²⁰

One could certainly interpret the loss of control and authority of religious institutions over individual religiosity and spirituality as evidence of structural secularization. But it is less evident that the change can be interpreted as religious decline rather than as a transformation of individual religiosity both outside as well as inside the religious denominations. The "baby boomers" have been rightly characterized as a generation of "seekers" who have brought a vanishing of boundaries between religion, spirituality, and secularity within as well as without religious denominations.²¹ The proportion of Americans who attend weekly religious services has certainly declined from the extraordinary heights of the 1950s, but it still remains strikingly high by any comparative standard, as high as in any other period of American history, and probably much higher than at the time of Tocqueville's visit. The number of those who claim never to attend religious services has increased moderately since the 1970s and somewhat more dramatically since the mid-1980s, and it is lately hovering in the upper teens. But lack of religious attendance does not mean necessarily irreligion. Other indicators of individual religiosity, such as "belief in God" or "belief in the after life" or "frequency of prayer" remain as high or higher than ever. Even the slight increase in the 1990s, from 8 percent to 12 percent, in the proportion of Americans who declare "no religion" as their religious preference, does not necessarily mean a growth of irreligion. It could also mean simply no particular denominational affiliation, or "spiritual" rather than traditionally "religious." It can also mean so many different forms of "Sheilaism," the kind of individual religious expression, which a respondent described in the following way: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."²² Without any attempt at precision, one can estimate that roughly 40 percent of Americans remain "unchurched." One can further

subdivide the unchurched roughly into three different groups: the loosely affiliated, who only attend religious services occasionally, several times a year, on high holidays and special occasions, constitute roughly one-fourth of them, that is, 10 percent of the general population; the "spiritual but not religious" who constitute slightly over 20 percent of the general population, that is, half of the unchurched; and the "no religion" proper, a group that constitutes approximately one-fourth of the unchurched and one-tenth of the general population. Included in this group would be atheists, the irreligious, and secular humanists, but even half of those apparently have some religious beliefs, since the number of Americans who confess "belief in God" or "belief in life after death" has remained constant at about 95 percent for decades.

Following Charles Taylor one could certainly say that Americans are living in a "paradigmatically Jamesian" world, and that the type of "spiritual religion" that Troeltsch denominated "individual mysticism" has become one of the main varieties of religious experience today.²³ But this variety appears not so much to supplant as to complement and add ferment to organized religion. Moreover, while James argued that this form of personal religion, which individuals experience in their solitude, is primordial, while all forms of organized institutional religion are secondary and derivative, Wuthnow has clearly shown that all forms of individual and popular spirituality are actually "rooted in experiences shaped by institutional religion."²⁴

From a Western monotheistic perspective such a condition of polytheistic and polyformic individual freedom may seem a highly novel or post-modern one. But from a non-Western perspective, particularly that of the Asian pantheist religious traditions, the condition looks much more like a traditional state of affairs. Individual mysticism has always been an important option, at least for elites and religious virtuosi, within the Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. What Inglehart calls the expansion of postmaterialist spiritual values can be understood in this respect as the generalization and democratization of options until now only available to elites and religious virtuosi in most religious traditions. As the privileged material conditions available to the elites for millennia are generalized to entire populations, so are the spiritual and religious options that were usually reserved for them. I would not characterize such a process, however, as religious decline, or as secularization. But what is certainly new in our global age is the simultaneous presence and availability of all world religions and all cultural systems, from the most "primitive" to the most "modern," often detached from their temporal and spatial contexts, ready

for flexible individual appropriation. Anybody can be initiated into any ancestral cult, be born again or reincarnated into any religious self, or remain a permanent "seeker" attuned to partial and consecutive revelations or illuminations.

*American Congregational Denominationalism
and Its Sources of Renewal*

The story of American congregational denominationalism, "the multitude of innumerable sects" organized as a congregational voluntary association joined in denominations has been told numerous times and Tocqueville got the story basically right. There is no need to elaborate it further here, other than first, to correct the myth of Puritan origins, which Tocqueville and some nativist writers today like Samuel Huntington still reproduce, and second, to add two key components, immigration and race, which Tocqueville either misses, ignores, or distorts but are in my view crucial for the persistent and recurring vitality of congregational denominationalism, indeed are the key to "American exceptionalism" and to questions of American national identity.²⁵

In trying to explain why the spirits of religion and freedom were intimately linked together in America while they marched in opposite directions in France, Tocqueville reverts to the American myth of Puritan origins, according to which the Puritans and other religious dissenters came to America seeking religious freedom from established churches and confessional states in Europe and founded the system of religious freedom that became eventually institutionalized in the American Constitution. To this he adds the Tocquevillian twist of viewing the New England democratic township paradoxically as the survival in the new world of the feudal medieval European tradition of autonomous townships, which was destroyed by centralized royal absolutism in France, but was better preserved in England and then transposed by English settlers onto the new world. There was in Tocqueville's developmental view of history the good old medieval ancien regime of aristocratic liberties and medieval free democratic towns, both of which would be destroyed by the bad parvenu absolutist ancien regime and its policies of anti-aristocratic equalization and antilocal centralization. The alliance of throne and altar under absolutism would in turn generate the rabidly antireligious policies of the French revolution, which in turn would generate the counterrevolutionary, antirepublican, and antidemocratic Catholic reaction, so that the spirits of

religion and freedom in France and in much of continental Europe would march almost always in opposite directions. But as the American case demonstrates, the opposition of religion and freedom was not intrinsic to modern democratic revolutions but was a conjunctural, that is, contingent and nonessential, French development due to particular historical circumstances.

Later historians have debunked the American myth of Puritan origins showing that intolerant Puritan New England was neither as "free" nor as "religious" as the myth implied and could hardly have been the model for the free competitive and pluralistic religious denominationalism that became institutionalized after independence. What remains valid is Tocqueville's insight that, as a voluntary association, the religious congregation remains the key democratic institution of the colonial township and the school of local municipal democracy after independence.

The "congregation" was indeed and has always remained the primary and constitutive institution of the American religious structure, irrespective of ecclesiology or denominational system.²⁶ But the congregation in early colonial America, across the colonies, was not the transposition of a European institution, but rather the local similarly recurrent response to the structural conditions of immigration into "the wilderness" and to the need to reconstitute some form of community to guarantee individual and collective survival. The story repeats itself in Puritan Boston, in Dutch Reformed New Amsterdam, in Quaker Philadelphia, and in Anglican Charleston. The autonomous democratically self-governed congregation comes first, the federation or incorporation into some denomination comes later. The same story will repeat itself throughout the American frontier. The same story will be repeated by all later immigrants, by German Lutherans in Pennsylvania, by Catholics and Jews. The local congregation, the ethnic parish, the local synagogue comes first, while the incorporation into diocese and/or national denomination comes later. The same story is being repeated today with the new immigrants, Christian and Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. They all start by building local, self-governing congregations.²⁷

The competitive diversity and the at least formal legal equality of American denominationalism was structured institutionally by the particular pattern of separation of church and state codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment, "free exercise of religion" and "no establishment." After independence, the establishment of any particular church at the federal national level was probably precluded by the territorial distribution

and the relative equal strength of the three colonial churches: Congregational, Presbyterian, and Anglican. However, either multiple establishment or the establishment of a generalized Christian (that is, Protestant) religion could have been likely outcomes, had it not been for the active coalition of Jefferson, Madison, and dissenting Baptists in Virginia. It was the Virginia Statute on Religious Liberty, written by Jefferson, that served as the model for the dual clause of the First Amendment, in turn written by Madison.

At first, this diversity and substantial equality was only institutionalized as internal denominational religious pluralism within American Protestantism. America was defined as a "Christian" nation and Christian meant solely "Protestant." But eventually, after prolonged outbursts of Protestant nativism directed primarily at Catholic immigrants, the pattern allowed for the incorporation of the religious others, Catholics and Jews, into the system of American religious pluralism.²⁸ A process of dual accommodation took place whereby Catholicism and Judaism became American religions, while American religion and the nation were equally transformed in the process. America became a "Judeo-Christian" nation and Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, became the three denominations of the American civil religion.

The fact that religion, religious institutions, and religious identities played a central role in the process of incorporation of the old European immigrants has been amply documented and forms the core of Will Herberg's well-known thesis.²⁹ Rather than decreasing, as one would expect from conventional theories of modernization and secularization, religious identities tended to gain salience in the particular context of immigration to America. Herberg's thesis implied that collective religious identities have been one of the primary ways of structuring internal societal pluralism in American history. Moreover, Herberg's claim that immigrants became more religious as they became more American has been restated by most contemporary studies of the new immigrant religions in America.³⁰

It is important to realize, therefore, that immigrant religiosity is not simply a traditional residue, an old world survival likely to disappear with adaptation to the new context, but rather an adaptive response to the new world. Moreover, it is not the general context of immigration per se, as neo-Durkheimian theories of religious responses to the anomic strain of immigrant uprootedness would tend to imply, nor the "theologizing" experience of immigrant uprootedness, uncertainty, and estrangement,

but rather the particular context of immigration to America and the structural and institutional context of American society that provokes this particular religious response, which is not found in other immigrant societies.³¹ The thesis implies not only that immigrants tend to be religious because of a certain social pressure to conform to American religious norms, something that is undoubtedly the case, but also, more important, the thesis implies that collective religious identities have always been one of the primary ways of structuring internal societal pluralism in American history. In my view, the thesis also offers a more plausible explanation of American religious vitality than rational choice supply-side theories of competitive religious markets.

Racialization and racial identities have been the other primary way of structuring internal societal pluralism in American history. Not religion alone, as Herberg's study would seem to imply, and not race alone, as contemporary immigration studies would seem to imply, but religion and race and their complex entanglements have served to structure the American experience of immigrant incorporation, indeed are the keys to "American exceptionalism."³² Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* examines the process of incorporation only of European immigrants, and thus is absolutely silent about non-European immigrants and their non-Judeo-Christian religions, such as Japanese Buddhists, or Chinese Taoists, or Arab Muslims. Though a serious oversight, one could still argue defensively that those were at the time relatively small minorities.

The real problem is that Herberg ignores the truly relevant racial minorities among the religious groups he is studying, the Christian "others": Black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics. After all, Herberg wrote his study in the 1950s, at the high point of the great internal migration of African Americans from the rural South to the Northern urban industrial centers and of the Puerto Rican migration to New York. Strictly speaking, of course, African-Americans and Hispanics were not immigrant "aliens." But it is the fact that Herberg constructs "Protestant," "Catholic," and "Jew" as the three imagined religious communities making up the imagined community of the American nation, that makes the omission of "blacks" and "Hispanics" the more problematic and revealing. What the omission of black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics reveals is that in the 1950s those groups remained the invisible racial "alien" at a time when European immigrants, Catholics and Jews, had been incorporated into the imagined community of the American nation.

Strictly speaking, Tocqueville did not ignore the issue of race. On the contrary, the final chapter of volume 1, "Some Considerations Concerning the Present State and Probable Future of the Three Races That Inhabit the Territory of the United States," offers a mordant critique of the policies of extermination of the Native Americans and of the inhuman and degrading system of slavery. He anticipates that the Union may split asunder over slavery and is well aware that the abolition of slavery will not bring an end to the logic of racialization built into the American social system but will only make racial relations more difficult and violent. By a sleight of hand, Tocqueville is able to place his analysis of white racial hegemony at the end of his study, as an excursus or postscript to his study of *Democracy in America*, for, as he conveniently writes, "these topics are like tangents to my subject, being American, but not democratic, and my main business has been to describe democracy. So at first I had to leave them on one side, but now at the end I must return to them."³³ This allows him to treat the subject with the critical seriousness it requires, but without having to revise his otherwise glowing review of American democracy, and thus without having to confront the fact that it is after all a white racial democracy founded on the enslavement, extermination, segregation, and apartheid of the racial others.

It would take another century after abolition for American democracy finally to confront its system of racial apartheid, and it only did so reluctantly because of the emergence of a civil rights movement nurtured, organized, and carried by the black churches, proving that religious congregations could be not only schools of democracy affirming the status quo, but also voices of ethical prophetic judgment placing the nation and American democracy on trial for failing to live up to the principles of the American civil religion. The draconian anti-immigration laws of the 1920s, which brought an end to the system of relatively open immigration to the United States, began as racial quotas and as racist anti-Chinese and anti-Asian legislation. The 1965 new immigration law, which opened again the gates of immigration to people from all races and all regions of the world, would have been unthinkable without the civil rights movement and the change it brought to American race relations.

The United States has become an immigrant society again. But the new immigrants are primarily non-Europeans, mostly from Asia and the Americas, and bring with them a tremendous range in all forms of human diversity, skills, and resources. From the particular perspective of my presentation, however, the most important characteristic is the extraordinary religious pluralism and diversity they bring to a country that was already

the most religiously diverse and pluralistic in the world.³⁴ Since U.S. government agencies cannot gather information on the religious makeup of the population, we do not have reliable data even on the denominational religious affiliation of the new immigrants.³⁵ But it is safe to assume that the immense majority of all new immigrants, somewhere between two-thirds and three-fourths, are nominally Christian, Protestant and Catholic in various proportions, depending upon the port of entry. In this respect, the most significant religious impact of the new immigrants is likely to be the replenishing and renovation of American Christianity. But since they bring non-European versions of Christianity, the new immigrants are also going to contribute to the de-Europeanization of American Protestantism and of American Catholicism.³⁶

But the most striking new development with extraordinary potential repercussions, both national and global, is the arrival of increasing numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, indeed of representatives of all world religions. American religious pluralism is expanding and incorporating all the world religions in the same way as it previously incorporated the religions of the old immigrants. A complex process of mutual accommodation is taking place. Like Catholicism and Judaism before, other world religions are being "Americanized," and in the process they are transforming American religion, while the religious diasporas in America are simultaneously serving as catalysts for the transformation of the old religions in their civilizational homes, in the same way as American Catholicism had an impact upon the transformation of world Catholicism and American Judaism has transformed world Judaism. The United States is bound to become "the first new global society" made up of all world religions and civilizations, at a time when religious civilizational identities are regaining prominence in the global stage.³⁷

Of all the new immigrant religions, Islam represents the most interesting testing ground and challenge to the pattern of immigrant incorporation for three interrelated reasons:

1. Because of geopolitical rationales and the common portrayal of Islam as fundamentalist, Islam today as Catholicism before is often represented as "the other" and therefore as "un-American." Tragically, these debates have only exacerbated in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11 by Muslim militants and the U.S. military response. Paradoxically, however, these developments are forcing not only a debate about the alleged civilizational clash between Islam and the West, but also a recognition that Islam has taken roots in America and is becoming a major American religion.

2. The challenge confronting Islam in America is how to transform diverse immigrants from South Asia, which today constitute the largest and fastest growing group of Muslim immigrants, from Arab countries, and from West Africa, into a single American Muslim *ummah*. In this respect, the process of incorporation is not unlike that of different Catholic national groups into a single American Catholic church.

3. Because of the still growing Islamization of the African American community, in a process which African American Muslims often depict not as conversion but rather as reversion to a preslavery African Islam, the often contentious dialogue and dynamic interaction between African American and immigrant Muslims is bound to have a dramatic impact upon the transformation of American culture. It is still an open question which kind of internal denominational structure Islam in America is going to assume. But if it is able to overcome in any way the pattern of congregational racial segregation, which has plagued American Christianity and to bridge the divide between immigrant and African American Muslims, it will have a significant impact upon American race relations.

Protestant Fundamentalism and American Civil Religion

Nobody is likely to question the fact that religion in America remains an important political institution. Less clear is whether one could still claim with Tocqueville that it "never intervenes directly in the government of American society" and that "the spirits of religion and of freedom" still march "intimately linked together."³⁸

In my book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, I argue that from independence to the present, American Protestantism had gone through three consecutive processes of disestablishment.³⁹ The "first disestablishment," the constitutional one, constructed the still disputed "wall of separation" between the Protestant churches and the federal state. It brought about the separation of the state from ecclesiastical institutions and the dissociation of the political community of citizens from any religious community. But the secularization of the state did not bring in its wake either the decline or the privatization of religion. By the time of Tocqueville's visit at the end of the Second Great Awakening, evangelical Protestantism had become established de facto as the American civil religion, that is, as the public religion of American civil society. The homogenization of the main Protestant denominations made possible the launching of a transdenominational evangelical crusade to "Christianize" the people, the social order,

and the republic. Indeed, under Andrew Jackson, the first "evangelical" president, the democratization of the aristocratic republic and the democratization of Christianity went hand in hand.

The "second disestablishment" cannot be traced back to one single event or to a series of events, but the final outcome is clear: the secularization of American higher education and the loss of Protestant cultural hegemony over the public sphere of American civil society and over the newly emerging large industrial urban centers in the Northeast and Midwest, where an increasingly divided Protestantism had to face the arrival of large new immigrant Catholic and Jewish majorities. Protestant fundamentalism emerged at the turn of the century as a modern antimodernist reaction against the "second disestablishment." It fought its battles on three fronts: against the liberal-modernist heresies within the northern evangelical denominations, against the teaching of Darwinism in the public schools, and against "rum and Romanism" in urban America. Despite some Pyrrhic victories with Prohibition and the Scopes trial, the fundamentalists lost the main battles and retreated to their separate congregations in a self-imposed religious and cultural ghetto. Most intellectuals assumed that defeated fundamentalism had been relegated to the dustbin of history.

For a few more decades the Protestant ethic continued to dominate public morality, the American way of life and "the American self." The New Deal, the welfare state, World War II, the Cold War, and the post-World War II economic boom made possible the rapid assimilation of the non-Protestant immigrant population into "the American way of life." By the mid-1950s, Protestant-Catholic-Jew had become the three denominational forms of a renewed American civil religion that had the Protestant ethic and faith in America's millennial role as its moral and doctrinal core. But the celebration of the new national consensus, symbolized in the election of the first Catholic president, did not last very long. By the late 1960s, the counterculture, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement, and the Catholic *aggiornamento* all had contributed to putting the American civil religion on trial, and there were numerous indications that a "third disestablishment," the disestablishment of the Protestant ethic from the American way of life, was under way. From now on, "the American way of life" would be characterized by the plurality of ways of life, by multiculturalism and by what could be called moral denominationalism. From the first to the third disestablishment, the interpretation of the First Amendment was progressively

extended from the constitutional protection of the “free exercise of religion” to freedom of inquiry, thought, and speech to freedom of mores, that is, of conduct, exemplified above all in the new right to privacy and in the gender and sexual revolutions.

It is in reaction to this third disestablishment that Protestant fundamentalism reemerged publicly and was reborn politically in the project of the Moral Majority and of the New Christian Right in 1979. But the very foundation of the Moral Majority as a transdenominational Judeo-Christian coalition attempting to include, in Jerry Falwell’s words, “Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Mormons, Fundamentalists,” would seem to indicate that Falwell did not believe that the reestablishment today of nineteenth-century Protestant hegemony was either desirable or possible. Only if such a majority of religious conservatives and “moral” Americans could be put together could the restoration of the Protestant ethic and of the American civil religion take place, presenting a serious threat to the civil liberties gained since the 1960s.

The impact of the mobilization of the New Christian Right on the 1980 elections has long been debated. The movement may not have driven the Reagan revolution, as some of its leaders claimed, but it was at least riding on its coattails. Yet in 1987, one year before Reagan’s departure from the White House, Falwell abandoned politics to rededicate himself full time to the management of his gospel conglomerate, but also acknowledging that the Moral Majority had failed to place its moral agenda at the center of the platform of the Republican party and had failed to bring conservative Catholics and Jews into the Moral Majority coalition. (Both things would happen with the election of George W. Bush in the year 2000.)

It is true that Catholics could become important allies on certain moral issues, on abortion, homosexuality, and generally on family and gender issues. But in their attempt to develop a consistently “pro-life” public moral position based on the sacred dignity of the human person, a “seamless garment” in the words of Cardinal Bernardin, the Catholic bishops and Catholic lay leaders made clear that their public moral agenda was much wider and included issues of social and economic justice at home and abroad, as well as issues of just war, world peace, a fair and just international order, and the moral use of power by the United States in the world. Their 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* and their 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* were directed unambiguously at two central policies of the Reagan administration, namely at the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union and at Reaganomics. In the first Gulf War, led by George H. W. Bush, a large number of American bishops, including

conservative Cardinal O’Connor of New York, followed Pope John Paul II in declaring the war unjust. During the Iraq War, initiated by George W. Bush, American bishops have not dared to speak publicly against the war despite the Vatican’s antiwar position. Consumed by their own pedophile scandal, a Catholic hierarchy that has lost its most liberal and critical voices only dares to speak up publicly on those public moral issues on which it is in agreement with the Protestant fundamentalists. Public morality in American politics and in the public sphere of American civil society have been reduced to pelvic issues, and the discourse of the American civil religion is once again sacralizing the manifest imperial destiny of the United States to make the world safe for democracy and free trade.

Defending himself against accusations that his concept of an American civil religion was used to support an idolatrous worship of the American nation, Robert Bellah replied that he always conceived of “the American civil religion not as a form of national self-worship but as the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it in terms of which it should be judged.”⁴⁰ Today it is obvious that the fusion of Protestant fundamentalism and the Republican Party has reestablished the nineteenth-century postmillennial Evangelical Protestant vision that America is a City on a Hill, the redeemer nation that is building the Kingdom of God at home and abroad. Bellah himself now concedes that “we must recover the idea that we are nothing more than a deeply flawed city of man” and that “our quest for freedom without limit is endangering the very basis of life on this planet.”⁴¹ Only alternative public moral voices, secular and religious, that can reformulate the discourse of the American civil religion in a clear critical direction will be able to unseat the established Christian-Republican coalition. A secular antireligious discourse alone cannot do it.

Religion has always been central in every major political and social transformation of American history, on both sides of the barricades in every contested issue and in every culture war. In *Revivals, Awakening, and Reforms*, his well-known interpretation of American history as a series of religious revivals, great awakenings, and social reform movements, published in 1978, the historian William McLoughlin argued that the United States found itself in the midst of its Fourth Great Awakening, but that no national consensus yet had been reached and its ultimate direction was still unclear. At some point in the future, clearly in the 1990s at best, a consensus will emerge that will thrust into political leadership a president with a platform committed to the kinds of fundamental restructuring that have followed our previous awakenings—in 1776, in 1830, and in 1932. He

expected the new ideological reorientation to include "a new sense of the mystical unity of all mankind and of the vital power of harmony between man and nature" as well as "some form of Judeo-Christian socialism" as the new political ideology. It is obvious that McLoughlin was not anticipating the triumph of the Republican Christian fundamentalist coalition.

But is this triumph only a temporary cultural backlash against the third disestablishment, or is it the consolidation of a new hegemonic Evangelical establishment? I wish I had a credible way to answer this question, but I have no better crystal ball than any of you, and social science has rarely proved very reliable in predicting future. I am willing to bet only that religion will continue to be vital in America at the three levels of individual spiritual religion, of free and ever more pluralistic denominationalism and of shaping American nationalism through some kind of civil religion and that Europeans (and now increasingly Canadians as well, particularly Quebecois) are going to continue to be struck, even dumbfounded if not horrified, when encountering such incomprehensible religious vitality in an otherwise modern, secular, and progressive (in the sense of future-oriented) nation. It contradicts most of the assumptions we have inherited from the Enlightenment, from scientific positivism and from social science theories of modernization and secularization.