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<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781315142852/decline-established-christianity-western-world-paul-silas-peterson>

Original publication:

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in: *The Decline of Established Christianity in the Western World: Interpretations and Responses*, edited by Paul Silas Peterson, pp. 33–74.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315142852>

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## Causes of the Decline: Historical, Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives

Paul Silas Peterson

In this essay, the contemporary discourse about “religion,” secularization and the historical origins of the decline of established Christianity in the Western world are presented. Following this, the sociological analysis of secularization (or de-churchization) is examined and some of the causal theories are introduced. Finally, the status of religion in the contemporary secularizing context is analyzed in connection to the discourse about post-secularism. Before turning to these themes, however, the complexity of this general field of inquiry will be addressed.

The decline of established Christianity in the Western world is being addressed in various interconnected historical, political, religious, sociological, economic and cultural discourses.<sup>1</sup> These discourses, which are not stabilized, interact with one another in disagreement, agreement (which eventually form schools of interpretation) and in more neutral forms of cross-reference. In some cases, there are parallel discourses which seem to coexist without any interaction whatsoever, even though the subject matter seems to be interrelated. As the literature on the subject demonstrates, the decline has generated a sense of unease. Schools of interpretation have formed which tend to see the decline in one specific way. These necessarily evoke the alternative paradigms that emphasize alternative theories. Some of the literature on this subject reflects the classic features of a “crisis discourse,” one that asks the reader (presumably church leaders and theologians) to make radical changes in order to prepare for an imminent – or already realized – epochal shift. Other literature, however, seems to relativize the trends entirely, and presents them as if nothing consequential has really happened, or is happening. The theme is treated differently in different disciplines. Some recent studies in the field of sociology are addressing the social impact of religious decline. The decline has certainly encouraged new reflection among theologians about the nature of the church and its mission today in the Western world. Among scholars of religion, more broadly, secularization has encouraged new reflection about the nature of “religion” in general. The decline of established Christianity and the omnipresence of the secularization discourse work as a kind of catalyst in multiple contemporary debates. In order to understand this field of inquiry, it is important to see it in the web of conflicting interpretation and in the orbits of disciplines.

### 1. “Religion” after the Decline

The decline of established religion may be encouraging a redefinition of the idea of religion in contemporary scientific religious discourses. Talk about secularization (in general) and the decline of established Christianity in the Western world (in particular) is all talk about “religion.” Like “secularization,” the term “religion” is highly contested. General concepts of “religion” was a classic theme of early modern philosophy in the wake of the wars of religion. In *De Veritate* (1624/1633), Herbert of Cherbury (1582/3–1648) drafted up five basic ideas of universal religion, or “common notions” (*notitiae communes*), as he called them: (1) a supreme deity exists; (2) this deity is to be venerated; (3) pious morality is necessary in this veneration; (4) repentance must be offered for fault and wickedness; (5) and there will be final rewards and punishments in the afterlife.<sup>2</sup> In most

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<sup>1</sup> Kocku von Stuckrad writes, “Discourses are communicative structures that organize knowledge in a given community; they establish, stabilize, and legitimize systems of meaning and provide collectively shared orders of knowledge in an institutionalized social ensemble. Statements, utterances, and opinions about a specific topic, systematically organized and repeatedly observable, form a discourse.” Kocku von Stuckrad, *The scientification of religion: An historical study of discursive change 1800-2000* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 11; emphasis in original. See also idem, “Discursive study of religion: approaches, definitions, implications,” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25 (2013), 5-25. Michael Lempert, “Discourse and Religion,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, et al. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2015), vol. 2, 902-919.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes and John Locke both studied Cherbury’s notions. See Sarah Hutton, *British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 104ff.; Diego Lucci, *Scripture and Deism: The*

contemporary academic discussions of the term, “religion” implies communities of faith and a whole range of religious ideas, experiences and practices. A very influential modern theory was offered by Émile Durkheim. He understood religion from the perspective of its purpose within society: the provision of social cohesion. Many contemporary theories still see it in this social and cultural paradigm. There are, however, many competing theories. In Daniel Pals’s summary presentation, there are nine major theories of religion: 1. religion, animism and magic (Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer); 2. religion and personality (Sigmund Freud); 3. religion and the sacred of society (Émile Durkheim), 4. religion and social and economic alienation (Karl Marx), 5. religion as a source of social action (Max Weber), 6. religion and religious experience (William James), 7. religion and the sacred (Mircea Eliade), 8. religion and society’s “Construct of the Heart” (Edward Evans-Pritchard) and 9. religion as cultural system (Clifford Geertz).<sup>3</sup> Cherbury would have probably found these contemporary theories to be far too general, and perhaps lacking the rational orientation necessary for a strong moral religion as the basis of society. One of the classic definitions of religion for most liberal Christian scholars – a definition that is still very influential today – was offered by William James in 1901-1902 at the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh. Somewhat similar to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s Romantic theory of religion as “beholding/ contemplation and feeling” (“Anschauung und Gefühl”),<sup>4</sup> James offered the academic world a psychological view of the essence of religion. James wrote:

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.<sup>5</sup>

In this system, the organized institutional expressions of religion (and the theologies) are thus *secondary* outgrowths of a more primal phenomenon which happens in the “feelings, acts, and experiences.” Regarding establishment, James writes: “In one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established, live at secondhand upon tradition; but *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine.”<sup>6</sup> James’s view of religion is influential today at the interface of religious studies and theological studies, in the discourse about the rise of individual spirituality, and in academic discussions about the persistence of “religion” in secularization.<sup>7</sup> He presents the essence of religion as something beyond (or deep below) teachings (such as Cherbury’s notions) and institutions (such as established churches). This theory captures the transcendent experience and separates the kernel-essence of “religion” from the secondary-shell of “theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations.”

Following in this tradition, and in face of the decline of established Christianity in the West in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “religion” has been defined in post-notional and post-institutional categories. With view to the contemporary discourse about religion, which is very broad and diverse, two examples of this trend can be briefly introduced. Volkhard Krech describes the “religious” as the experience of the holy, the experience of the sacred cosmos, as a form of orientation for action or as a form of communication. These forms of religion can be found in

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*Biblical Criticism of the Eighteenth-Century British Deists* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 26. It was put on the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books in 1633.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Niklas Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (London: Longmans, 1935), 31, emphasis in the original.

<sup>6</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 30, emphasis in the original.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead with Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerszynski, Karin Tusting, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

cultural discourses, discourses about the individual in the modern world, in political discourse and in discourse about the arts. He sees the older assignments of pastors, such as the pastoral application of theological knowledge, in a process of transformation. The new assignments have more to do with encouraging “life-world communication.” Religious people can practice this among themselves without the support of pastoral institutions and without doctrinal theology. In fact, the identification of ecclesial institutions with this religious communication may be more of a hindrance than a support. In today’s working world, churches are, after all, in direct competition with non-ecclesial organizations.<sup>8</sup> From this theoretical analysis of the “religious” today, which is in no way limited to ecclesial institutions, Krech asks whether “religious communication in modern society” may prefer other social forms as opposed to ecclesial organizations.<sup>9</sup> Possible candidates might be those groups that could provide a place for religious communication, religious practice and religious socialization which was previously carried out by the “family and ‘church discipline.’”<sup>10</sup> Krech’s paradigm seeks to overcome the interpretive dichotomy of secularization as resulting in either the diffusion of religious systems (such as the decline of established Christianity) or the return of religious systems.<sup>11</sup>

A similar approach to the understanding of religion can be found among many scholars today. Kocku von Stuckrad has also contributed to the discussion that widens the parameters to allow for a more general analysis of religion in the secular context, and under the conditions of individuality and pluralization. He introduces a “reconfiguration of the religious fields of discourse”. This entails the conceptual language of underlying processes of the “communitarization, scientification, aestheticization, and public activation” of religion.<sup>12</sup> Viewed through this lens, one must overcome the “simplistic dichotomizations of the religious versus the secular” because the nature of religion itself is changing, as these discourses show.<sup>13</sup> Both Krech and Stuckrad’s contemporary descriptions of religion in secular contexts have sought to understand “religion” or “the religious” in conceptual frameworks without necessary reference to organized systems of religious institutions. In this regard, they follow trends from the 1970s and 1980s which minimized the significance of institutions.

According to these contemporary theories of religion, religious experience and communication will certainly survive the decline of established Christianity. Normative doctrinal theologies and institutions are not central in these conceptual interpretation of religion (even though the theme of community is emphasized). Historically, this analysis of religion can be understood in continuity with liberal Protestant theology. William James’s psychological view of religion, as cited above, is an important theoretical reference point in this development. Yet Adolf von Harnack’s view of the essence of Christianity is also an important example of the pre-history. Harnack developed his theory following the tradition of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century German Protestant theology. He held that the essential “kernel” content of the Christian religion (infinite value of the human being, love of neighbor and the divine parenthood of all humanity) had to be liberated from its antiquated “shell” of theological doctrine (Trinity, Christology, doctrine of atonement, etc.). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Protestants thought that Harnack’s idea was radical. In a sense, the new concepts of religion today are taking the next step. They suggest that a propositional “kernel,” and the traditional institution that once existed to support this, is not necessary for understanding “religion.” This is not an “altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’” (Acts 17:23), it is an altar without an inscription.

With regard to the decline of established Christianity, one may clearly presume that this form of “religion” and “the religious,” as described by these contemporary scholars, will continue to

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<sup>8</sup> Volkhard Krech, *Wo bleibt die Religion? Zur Ambivalenz des Religiösen in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Kocku von Stuckrad, “Secular Religion: A Discourse-historical Approach to Religion in Contemporary Western Europe,” in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28 (2013), 1-14, here: 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

exist. The concept is defined so broadly that it is essentially the same thing as human consciousness or a form of human communication. In this regard, these theories of religion are actually somewhat similar to Hegelian philosophy. Hegel understood self-realizing consciousness to be the essence of religion, and the epitome of divine becoming. While these paradigms of interpretation suggest that the concept of “religion” will be saved from complete irrelevance in the context of an increasingly secular Western world, the term “religion” may not, in the end, actually fit in these theories. There is a fundamental question to be asked here about the continuity of the terminology. Can these systems of interpretation legitimately lay claim upon the semantic domain of the term “religion” – and especially as it is used outside of the university discourses? Is it not the case that they are really talking about *human consciousness* or *human communication*? In the traditional sense, the term “religion” means something like *spiritual worship of the Creator*, or it refers to a specific framework of *teachings and practices that are instilled in religious communities from one generation to the next through institutional organizations that exist to support them*. Take for example this very common definition of “religion” offered online at Dictionary.com: “a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.”<sup>14</sup> The contemporary descriptions of religion addressed above may cover some dimensions of this widely held (and now very traditional) concept of religion (and especially the concept of mysticism as addressed by Troeltsch), but they seem to redefine the term to the effect that it no longer signifies that semantic domain which is usually intended by the normal use of the term “religion.” The trade-off of this theoretical paradigm is the salvation of the concept of “religion” in non- or less-religious contexts (and this is, indeed, the true genius of these contemporary authors’ concepts of “religion”). Yet the “religious” seems to be in places where there is, in fact, little clear evidence to suggest this (in the traditional sense of “religion,” at least). While there is a major yield in this system, the caesura (see below) should not be overlooked.

## 2. Theories of the Decline

In terms of the subject matter of this volume, the terms “secularization” and “de-churchization” can be used almost synonymously.<sup>15</sup> More precisely, however, the term “secularization” refers to *the decline of religious practices and beliefs and the broader process whereby religion loses relevance in society*. By contrast, the term “de-churchization” refers primarily to *the decline of the level of “churchliness” in society as it is measured in the number of churches, church members, baptisms, confirmations, attendance rates, knowledge of Christianity in society and cultural reverence for the church and Christianity*. One term is a general concept while the other is concerned with a specific phenomenon. The term “secularism” refers to an ideological standpoint which seeks to *promote* the process of secularization, and thus raise the level of secularity in society. In common language today, however, the terms “secularism” and “secularization” are often used synonymously.

### 2.1. Secularization and modernity

Much of the contemporary discourse about secularization and “post-secularization”<sup>16</sup> goes back to old theories developed around 1900 with the popularization of the sociology of religion with Max Weber. According to Gottfried Küenzlen’s respected analysis of Weber’s sociology of religion, the

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<sup>14</sup> “Religion,” *Dictionary.com*, based on the *Random House Dictionary* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2017), [www.dictionary.com/browse/religion](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/religion) accessed 9 May, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Philip S. Gorski and Ates Altinordu, “After Secularization?” in *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008), 55-85. Chaves and Voas, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” 9. For an analysis of secularism outside of the Western world, see Akeel Bilgrami, ed., *Beyond the Secular West* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, ed., *Postsäkularismus: Zur Diskussion eines umstrittenen Begriffs* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015). In this volume, *Postsäkularismus*, José Casanova provides three interpretations of the term “secular.”

tragedy of religion in the Western world is the fact that the very religion that brought forth the “disenchantment” of the world, reformed Protestantism, was ultimately to be abolished by the same processes of disenchantment that it introduced.<sup>17</sup> The Enlightenment forces of rationalization and disenchantment, which have roots in Protestantism, are therefore understood as the driving force of modern secularization. Operating in this Weber-tradition, the Austrian-born American sociologist Peter L. Berger claimed in the 1960s that traditional religions were on tracks of terminal decline that ran parallel to the processes of modernization.<sup>18</sup> This view of an inherent connection between modernization and the decline of religion became very popular in the 1960s and 1970s in the sociology of religion.

In many ways, Berger was correct in his analysis of secularization. He described it as a process by which society emerges from the influence of religious institutions and symbols. The totality of human life, including its cultural, philosophical, legal and scientific aspects, is no longer understood in terms of religious content. These realms of human life slowly establish themselves as autonomous areas without a necessary reference to religion. Within this conceptual framework, religions are no longer ruling institutions. They are rather competing agencies. They compete with other agencies that provide religious experiences and orientation. They are in competition with one another for individuals’ religious devotion.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation encouraged a turn to the “religious market” paradigm for understanding religion in the modern world.

In the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, central components of the thesis were strongly challenged.<sup>20</sup> Many claimed that the direct correlation between modernization and the sidelining of religion was too general and that it failed to account for the plurality of religious phenomena in modern societies. The new thesis that came to dominate academic discourse was the idea of a return of religion under the conditions of a pluralizing society. With this came a new emphasis on individuality and personal spirituality, the processes of cultural diversification and patchwork religiosity.<sup>21</sup> This is still the

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<sup>17</sup> Gottfried Küenzlen, *Die Religionssoziologie Max Webers: eine Darstellung ihrer Entwicklung* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1980), 126; see Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129-56. See also Thomas Bohrmann, “Erosion und kulturelle Entmündigung des Christentums in Europa: zu Gottfried Küenzlens Kultur- und Religionssoziologie,” in *Religion als Lebensmacht: Eine Festgabe für Gottfried Küenzlen*, ed. Jochen Bohn and Thomas Bohrmann (Leipzig: Evang. Verl.-anst., 2010), 309-322, here: 311. Cf. Alexander Heit and Georg Pfeleiderer, ed., *Sphärendynamik 1: Zur Analyse postsäkularer Gesellschaften* (Zürich: Pano-Verl., 2011), idem, ed., *Sphärendynamik 2: Religion in postsäkularen Gesellschaften* (Zürich: Pano Verl., 2012). Jens Köhrsen, “Religion ohne Religion?: Säkularisierung als Ausbreitungsprozess funktionaler Äquivalente zur Religion,” in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 70 (2014), 231-253. Julia Koll, “Religion im Zeitalter der Kontingenz,” in *Praktische Theologie* 49 (2014), 127-129. Julia Koll, “Religion im Zeitalter der Kontingenz,” in *Praktische Theologie* 49 (2014), 127-129. Stéphane Rials, ed., *Sécularisation[s] - 1 [= Droits: Revue française de théorie, de philosophie et de cultures juridiques*, 58, 2014]. Stéphane Rials, ed., *Sécularisation[s] - 2 [= Droits: Revue française de théorie, de philosophie et de cultures juridiques*, 59, 2014]. Joachim R. Söder, “Modernitäten, Säkularitäten, Religiositäten: eine philosophische Sondierung,” in *Theologie der Gegenwart* 57 (2014), 242-250. Christian Spieß, Katja Winkler and Karl Gabriel, ed., *Modelle des religiösen Pluralismus: Historische, religionssoziologische und religionspolitische Perspektiven* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Peter L. Berger, “A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion,” in *The New York Times*, Feb. 25, 1968, pg. 3. See also Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1967, 1990). See also Thomas Luckmann, *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft: Institution, Person und Weltanschauung* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1963). Berger saw the origins of modern secularism largely in Protestantism. He does, however, develop a prehistory of the concept. Later he “changed his mind” about the direct connection between modernization and secularization. Regarding the contemporary debate about forms of religion in secular societies, see Thomas Dienberg, Thomas Eggensperger and Ulrich Engel, ed. *Woran glaubt Europa?: zwischen Säkularisierung und der Rückkehr des Religiösen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Peter L. Berger, *Zur Dialektik von Religion und Gesellschaft: Elemente einer soziologischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1973).

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” in *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999), 249-273.

<sup>21</sup> Gottfried Küenzlen, *Die Wiederkehr der Religion: Lage und Schicksal in der säkularen Moderne* (München: Olzog, 2003); Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter: Religion in der modernen Kultur* (München:

dominant theory in much of the literature on the subject. It presumes that “religion” finds a way to thrive even with institutional decline.

In contemporary research, some of Weber’s old themes (in modified forms) have reemerged.<sup>22</sup> One of the classic arguments that was used to reject Weber has been challenged. Weber’s view of modernity and secularization was often rejected based upon the “American exception.” America appeared to be both modern *and* religious. This counterexample seemed to disprove Weber’s thesis. Today, however, recent studies in the sociology of religion have called the “American exception” into question. For example, Mark Chaves and David Voas write:

Whether or not the United States is a counterexample thus opens into the larger question of whether or not modernity, sooner or later, will bring secularization. This is of course a classic question in sociology. For a long time the majority of social scientists answered affirmatively, but the critics of secularization turned the tide so effectively that today the weight of scholarly opinion is on the other side. America’s accepted status as a counterexample did much to shift opinion in that direction. We are not prepared to say that removing that status should by itself reinstate the old idea that modernity everywhere will bring secularization eventually. We are prepared to say, however, that since it no longer is clear that the U.S. is on a qualitatively different religious trajectory than Europe, it is too soon to assert that the secularization thesis does not apply outside of Europe, Canada, and Australia. It now seems that the classic question – does modernity undermine religion? – has been prematurely answered, “not in general.” That answer should be reconsidered in light of the evidence we have presented here.<sup>23</sup>

At the theoretical level, the discourse about secularization today has modified many of the older theories. For example, Thomas M. Schmidt holds that we are now in a process of reflexive secularization in which secular rationality continues to marshal asymmetrical authority.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2. *Secularization, women and social change*

Gender roles and social morality play strongly into the broader discourse about secularization. Following Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, Mary Eberstadt provided an alternative interpretation of Western secularization that emphasizes a very practical issue of human life that is sometimes ignored in debates about the general theories of secularization and the long historical trajectories of secularity. Eberstadt focuses on the familial dimension of secularization and the interrelationship between the decline of traditional familial structures and organized religion.<sup>25</sup> The familial dimension of the secularization narrative has also been developed by Callum Brown.<sup>26</sup> He sees the transition to a secular society as constituting real shifts that bring with them socially significant trends of reform. He addressed this issue of secularization in his inaugural lecture on the 13<sup>th</sup> of

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Beck, 2004); Ulrich H. J. Körtner, *Wiederkehr der Religion?: Das Christentum zwischen neuer Spiritualität und Gottvergessenheit* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006); Krech, *Wo bleibt die Religion?*

<sup>22</sup> Many Weber scholars have also argued that Weber was aware that religion might return in modern forms.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Chaves and David Voas, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” Paper presented on the 23rd of July, 2014, at the meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, p. 30. Cf. Peter L. Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, secular Europe?: A theme and variations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas M. Schmidt, “Reflexive Säkularisierung? Religiöser Glaube und öffentliche Vernunft,” in *Europa mit oder ohne Religion?: der Beitrag der Religion zum gegenwärtigen und künftigen Europa*, ed. Kurt Appel, et al. (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2014), 23-38. See also Kurt Appel, et al., ed., *Europa mit oder ohne Religion? II. Der Beitrag der Religion zum gegenwärtigen und künftigen Europa* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2016); Christiane Moldenhauer and Jens Martin Monsees, ed., *Die Zukunft der Kirche in Europa* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Mary Eberstadt, *How the West really lost God: A new theory of secularization* (West Conshohocken, Penn.: Templeton Press, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> See Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001).

March, 2014, at the University of Glasgow. He draws attention to the decline of “religious fervor” in the Western world and the loss of faith “even in the liberal God of Paul Tillich.” In this lecture, Brown focuses specifically on the liberation of women as a major impulse of the decline of organized religion. The liberation of women from the old patriarchal ideals of the 1950s went together with the decline of established religion and religious identity. Already before the 1950s, however, the “content of Western morality has been changing, the codes of what is deemed to be moral have been changing” and “step by step for the last 130 years or so,” it has been “secular people who have led this change.”<sup>27</sup>

Brown sees the rise of secularization in terms of moral progress. There is an old debate about this issue in German philosophy. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Friedrich Nietzsche provided an account of the rise of Christian thought and moral sensibilities in the shadow of the decline and fall of Roman, Greek and northern European forms of pagan morality.<sup>28</sup> In Nietzsche’s thinking, this great shift of religious and ideological sentiment initiated a fundamental ethical transformation in the history of Western culture. This epic shift is characterized especially by the ascendancy of a new Judeo-Christian slave-morality. This slave-morality is marked by a preference for those moral principles that are beneficial for the poor and weak. According to Nietzsche, this morality was formed in the world of the persecuted groups of Judeo-Christian religion. With the rise of this morality of the weak and the poor, the powerful and the morality of the powerful were eventually subverted. The question that arises here is whether or not the moral impulses of the Jewish and Christian traditions will survive in the long run in secular societies. Since the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many moral philosophers claimed that a positive morality – one that is compassionate and just towards the weak and poor – can be sustained without an ultimate foundation in religion. According to the dominant impulse of this tradition, reason alone is sufficient to sustain this morality. Of course, these philosophers wrote their treatises in contexts that were deeply influenced by the moral norms of the Christian religion. In effect, they offered new theories for legitimizing much of what was already status quo.

While Brown sees the rise of secularization in terms of moral progress, others are more skeptical. Some understand the decline of established Christianity in the Western world as bringing about a decline in social morality and cultural vitality. Joseph Bottum recently claimed that the decline of mainline Protestantism in the United States has led to moral decline and the eclipse of the old moral foundation of American society. Yet he holds that the moral framework of America’s elites continues to be liberal Protestantism. Bottum asserts that the great grandchildren of Walter Rauschenbusch control the media, universities and the political discourse of the more secular Democratic Party.<sup>29</sup> Christie Davies, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Andreas Püttmann, Neil Ferguson and many others see a negative development with the weakening of Christian morals.<sup>30</sup> Yet Friedrich

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<sup>27</sup> Callum G. Brown, “Secularisation and civilization: Can history show if society is ‘good without god?’” Inaugural Lecture, 13 March, 2014, University of Glasgow. Cf. Callum Brown, *Religion and the demographic revolution: Women and secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Original edition: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift* (Leipzig: Naumann, 1887); critical edition: *Nietzsche Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Mazziono Montinari and Giorgio Colli, vol. VI/2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968); English translation: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil/ On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2014); on his connection to the various forms of 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism, see Bernhard H. F. Taureck, *Nietzsche und der Faschismus: ein Politikum* (Leipzig: Reclam, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Bottum, *An anxious age: The post-Protestant ethic and the spirit of America* (New York, NY: Image, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Christie Davies, *Permissive Britain: Social change in the sixties and seventies* (London: Pitman, 1975); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The de-moralization of society: From Victorian virtues to modern values* (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1995); Andreas Püttmann, “Führt Säkularisierung zum Moralverfall? Eine Antwort auf Hans Joas,” in *Die Neue Ordnung* 66 (2012), 367-377; idem, *Gesellschaft ohne Gott: Risiken und Nebenwirkungen der Entchristlichung Deutschlands* (Asslar: Gerth Medien, 2010); idem, *Führt Säkularisierung zum Moralverfall?: eine Antwort auf Hans Joas* (Zimmern-Stetten: Ordo Militiae Crucis Templi, 2013); Neil



Wilhelm Graf has rightly warned against postulating a decline into chaos or “anarchy” as a result of the trends of de-churchization.<sup>31</sup>

Hans Joas recently argued that public morality is not dependent upon religion, even though he sees it as an important component of ethical universalism.<sup>32</sup> Joas draws upon Phil Zuckerman’s work on post-religious societies.<sup>33</sup> Some aspects of these arguments from Zuckerman and Joas are built upon complicated theoretical approaches that are difficult to verify. They also raise new questions that are philosophical in nature and entail issues related to the history of religion and cultural theory.<sup>34</sup>

Specifically in the area of young-adult personality and character development, Christian churches, and especially youth ministries, provide positive life-orientation, strong values and long term support networks. Of course, the recent child abuse scandals in many Catholic Churches have shed a new light on the other side of the story: the church as an institution of abuse. Our contemporary situation is clearly filled with contradiction. At the same time, however, there is also significant evidence that points to the positive effects of religion in society and in mental health. A study of 9,000 Europeans revealed that “[p]articipation in religious organizations may offer mental health benefits beyond those offered by other forms of social participation.”<sup>35</sup>

While empirical studies may point to some positive effects of religion, these effects have not slowed the decline of established Christianity. Referring to the British context, Steve Bruce, Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, argues that religion today is already “alien.” Drawing upon statistic material, he writes, “In a nutshell, religion is now primarily carried by, and hence associated with, people who are demographically, ethnically and culturally distinctive. Being religious is no longer a characteristic that is thinly but fairly evenly distributed throughout the population: it is concentrated in specific minority populations, which reinforces the sense that religion is what other people do.”<sup>36</sup> Bruce argues that “popular religion” is not independent of organized, institutional and established religion, but rather dependent upon it. He writes, “What the popular religion critique of the secularisation thesis misses is an appreciation of how folk religion

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Ferguson, *Civilisation: The West and the Rest* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2012). This has also been addressed from various perspectives in Gerhard Schwarz, et al., ed., *Religion, Liberalität und Rechtsstaat: ein offenes Spannungsverhältnis* (Zürich: Verl. Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, “‘Dechristianisierung’: zur Problemgeschichte eines kulturpolitischen Topos,” in *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 32-66, here: 42.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Joas, *Glaube als Option. Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Phil Zuckerman, *Society without God: What the least religious nations can tell us about contentment* (New York, N.Y.: N.Y. University Press, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Kjell O. Lejon and Marcus Agnafors, “Less Religion, Better Society? On Religion, Secularity and Prosperity in Scandinavia,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50 (2011), 297-307. On this theme (and a discussion of the historical background going back to the Enlightenment), see my “Gesellschaftliche Folgen der Entkirchlichung Deutschlands? Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Frage,” in *Deutsches Pfarrernetz* 115 (2015), 312-318.

<sup>35</sup> Simone Croezen, Mauricio Avendano, Alex Burdorf and Frank J. van Lenthe, “Social Participation and Depression in Old Age: A Fixed-Effects Analysis in 10 European Countries,” in *American Journal of Epidemiology* 182/2 (2015), 168-176. As the study explains: “Earlier research found that religiously active persons have better mental health than the religiously inactive. Our findings suggest that this association might reflect a causal association. Participation in religious organizations may protect mental health through several pathways, including influencing lifestyle, enhancing social support networks, and offering a mechanism for coping with stress. For example, religion has been shown to serve as a coping mechanism during a period of illness in late life. Through participation in religious activities, people may also become more attached to their communities, which prevents social isolation, a predictor of old-age depression. Spirituality has also been proposed as an important promoter of mental health, but this construct is not well defined, and its relationship with depression is not well understood. By contrast, people may not accrue the same social support, lifestyle, and coping benefits from participating in sports, social clubs, or other kinds of clubs, which may explain why these forms of social participation did not predict levels of depressive symptoms 4 years later.” Ibid., 173f.

<sup>36</sup> Steve Bruce, “Late Secularization and Religion as Alien,” in *Open Theology* 1 (2014), 13-23, here: 17.

relies on the resources of organised religion.”<sup>37</sup> This claim challenges the assertion that some form of post-secular Christian spirituality will be able to thrive without the established institutional organizations that sustain the broader cultural background and the language.

### 2.3. *Secularization, generational cohorts and “fuzzy fidelity”*

Many of the theories of the decline point to generational shifts. In this framework, an insightful analysis of contemporary secularization has been developed by David Voas. He argues, “Each generation in every [European] country surveyed is less religious than the last, measured by the best available index of religiosity.”<sup>38</sup> While this broad trend can be established based upon many scientific sociological studies of religion, there is another, more general group of people who are more difficult to classify. Drawing upon extensive sociological data, he writes in summary, “Many people are neither regular churchgoers nor self-consciously non-religious. The term ‘fuzzy fidelity’ describes this casual loyalty to tradition.” As Voas explains, “Religion usually plays only a minor role in the lives of such people. Religious change in European countries follows a common trajectory whereby fuzzy fidelity rises and then falls over a very extended period. The starting points are different across the continent, but the forces at work may be much the same.”<sup>39</sup> This trend of “fuzzy fidelity” is therefore not evidence of the long-term resilience of religion or a post-secular Christian religiosity or spirituality in the face of broader trends of secularization. Rather, it is evidence of the processes of secularization as people move from stronger positions of religious commitment, belonging or identification, to weaker positions.

One of the difficulties of this general theory is its failure to distinguish between specific groups, such as the larger established churches, the close-knit Christian communities (including those that exist within the larger established churches) and individualistic-mystical Christianity. Sociological evidence suggests that these three forms of the faith are on different paths of development, even though Western society as a whole is on the path described by Voas.

The sociologists of religion, Mark Chaves and David Voas, have recently analyzed the situation in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. As briefly mentioned above, they claim that the United States is not an exception to the rule of secularization based on trends between generational cohorts. They write, “Religious commitment is weakening from one generation to the next, and these generational differences are the main proximate cause of the aggregate decline.”<sup>40</sup> Although many have claimed that the United States is an exception to this rule, they hold that contemporary statistic evidence calls this theory into question. They write, “When looking at the U.S., secularization critics either deny religious decline or, when acknowledging some decline, discount its theoretical significance by emphasizing the still high levels of American religiosity, the recent start of decline, or the slowness of decline. The result is to preserve the United States’ theoretical standing as a decisive counterexample to the secularization thesis.”<sup>41</sup> Though they hold that “there may be more diffuse spirituality now than previously,” this should not be mistaken “for an increase in traditional religiosity.” Far from it, this may be seen as “a consequence of the decline in traditional religiosity,” the evidence of which, in “every indicator,” is “either stable or declining.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Steve Bruce, “Secularisation, Church and popular religion,” in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62 (2011), 543-561, here: 560. Cf. Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In defence of an unfashionable theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> David Voas, “The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe,” in *European Sociological Review* 25:2 (2009), 155-168, here: 167.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Chaves and David Voas, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” 30. See also Jan Reitsma, Ben Pelzer, Peer Scheepers and Hans Schilderman, “Believing and belonging in Europe: cross-national comparisons of longitudinal trends (1981-2007) and determinants,” in *Journal of Empirical Theology* 27 (2014), 154-175.

<sup>41</sup> Chaves and Voas, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

When looking at the cohort data for the United Kingdom, Chaves and Voas explain that the “largest drops occurred among people born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.”<sup>43</sup> The cohort replacement theory reflects generational transition: “the mechanism that produces cohort effects is straightforward: we are socialized by the religious environment of our upbringing, and members of each successive cohort in Great Britain (and elsewhere in the West) are less likely to have been raised in religious households and are therefore less likely to be religious as adults.”<sup>44</sup> The case of Canada is particularly remarkable where “reported weekly church attendance was a staggering 67 percent in 1946.” Since then, however, it “has been falling steadily ever since and now stands at 18 percent”. They report that among the younger generations this trend towards secularization is stronger, “half have no contact with religion at all and, among those who do, most attend services only rarely.”<sup>45</sup>

There is also a dramatic shift underway in the United States: “Among people born in the 1980s, declared affiliation is a full 20 percentage points lower than among those born fifty years earlier (72.8 percent versus 92.8 percent).”<sup>46</sup> In their analysis of secularity in the United States they use a scale of identification-strength and thus show, through cohort replacement statistics, that the number of people with strong identification is in decline, “In any case, cohort replacement eroded religious affiliation throughout the past four decades.” Indeed, “cohort replacement has been pushing strong religious affiliation downward in the United States.”<sup>47</sup> Similar trends can be identified on scales of church attendance, belief and upbringing in the United States, “The trend lines show steady generational drift away from unwavering belief”. Each cohort appears to be “slightly less definite about God than the one before, with the result that the overall level of belief in God is being eroded”.<sup>48</sup>

The statistical material about familial life and religion reflects the same development, “Americans are increasingly less likely to grow up in households with religiously active parents and, overall, are less likely to be religiously socialized as children.” On the whole, “This decline in religious socialization is surely a key part of the explanation of cohort differences in adult religiosity. Cohort-based decline tends to be self-reinforcing, which has important implications for the future of religious involvement.”<sup>49</sup> As an overall conclusion, “religiosity has been declining in the United States for decades, albeit slowly and from high levels.” Furthermore, “religious commitment is weakening from one generation to the next, and these generational differences are the main proximate cause of the aggregate decline.”<sup>50</sup> Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith call this the “Great Abdicating” in their critical examination of the growing cross-section of society in America that is turning away from organized religion.<sup>51</sup>

#### 2.4. *The decline and the non-Western world*

Can trends of secularization be reversed? Karel Dobbelaere has drawn attention to this phenomenon in Russia where the religion seems to have returned in an official sense and now provides a new legitimacy to the Russian regime.<sup>52</sup> The Russian comparison is not entirely helpful, however, as that Russia does not have the same cultural, social and political history as much of the Western world. There is no example of a fundamental and large-scale reversal of these trends in the societies and cultures of the Western world. There are, however, many examples of vibrant traditional ecclesial

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 29f.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* (New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Karel Dobbelaere, “De la sécularisation,” in *Revue théologique de Louvain* 39 (2008), 177-196, here: 195f.

communities, “emergent churches” and immigrant churches that continue to thrive in the Western world (this is addressed below). Furthermore, many evangelical (including Pentecostal) churches are stable or growing. In other words, there are pockets of Christian vitality on the broader landscape of the decline of established Christianity. As Hartmut Lehmann has argued, the trends of secularization in the West may continue in the rest of the world. There are, in fact, many signs of this taking place already in South America. On the other hand, the trends of secularization could be reversed. This reversal remains, however, a theoretical postulate. The whole shift towards secularization in the West could be viewed, at some later date in history, as an “episode” or, on the other hand, as a “pilot-project” (for the rest of the world). At the moment, either option seems to be theoretically possible.<sup>53</sup> The body of evidence at this point does not offer any reason to believe that there will be a resurgence of established Christianity in the Western world. On virtually all scales of measurement, it is in trends of regression today. Indeed, the influence of Western established Christianity in the non-Western world is also in dramatic decline, even though some theological institutions in the West remain influential. The formation of anti-liberal forces in the confessional communities of the Anglican World Communion and the Lutheran World Federation are two examples of this broader trend of Western established Christianity’s waning influence in the non-Western world. Non-Western Catholicism – which tends to be far more conservative than Pope Francis – continues to grow in influence within the Roman Catholic Church as well.

### 3. Historical Analysis of the Decline

From a historical perspective one might ask if the contemporary trends of secularization or de-churchization are simply one episode in a long circular drama of rising enthusiastic piety, on the one hand, and receding religion in skepticism and secularity, on the other. Should the freefall of religious adherence in the West today be viewed as one stage in a repeating phenomenon? Contemporary historians have drawn attention to the significance of modern developments. Looking back through the history of Christianity, it is difficult to find a comparison of our contemporary situation of secularization. The only comparable examples are the conversions of the northern Europeans in the Middle Ages and the Romans in late antiquity. This is, however, only analogous in some regards. Note two differences here: First, these historical conversion processes were, in part, forced by political power. Second, there is a substantial difference in the time frame. The larger part of the contemporary decline of established Christianity in the Western world took place in approximately 50 years (and appears to be continuing), whereas the conversion processes in the aforementioned examples took centuries.<sup>54</sup>

#### 3.1. “Long” accounts of secularization

One of the popular historical analyses of secularization claims that it is essentially the religion’s own creation. This theory surfaces strongly in Max Weber. Many of the later representatives of this theory built on his claims and modified them, such as Peter L. Berger and many contemporary authors, such as Charles Taylor. After the first great wave of established church decline in the 1970s and 1980s, many authors committed themselves to the task of uncovering the big pre-history of secularization.

Following Weber, Berger sees trends in ancient Judaism which move in this direction and were taken up and promoted by the Reformation. “The Protestant Reformation,” Berger writes, “may then be understood as a powerful re-emergence of precisely those secularizing forces that had been ‘contained’ by Catholicism, not only replicating the Old Testament in this, but going decisively beyond it.”<sup>55</sup> Brad S. Gregory has revived a part of this thesis. Gregory sees the Reformation, and the

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<sup>53</sup> Hartmut Lehmann, *Säkularisierung: Der europäische Sonderweg in Sachen Religion* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004), 35.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Großbölting has made this point in his *Der verlorene Himmel: Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2013).

<sup>55</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 124.

fall from grace from the Aristotelian metaphysics of the Middle Ages, as the critical driving force behind secularization and many contemporary problems in Western society.<sup>56</sup> Was the Reformation the critical motor that gave birth to modern secularization? The Reformation certainly set the stage for broad cultural and social debates about religious plurality. In this regard, it played a decisive role in changing the religious situation of the late Middle Ages and disenchanting the power of a centralized ecclesial system.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, however, the significance of the Reformation for the emergence of secularization should not overshadow the other contingent developments that emerged after it in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and especially in the 1960s. On this issue, there is a great danger of reading the later events back into the fabric of the earlier ones.

Drawing upon Weber's basic theories regarding the trajectory of Protestant rationalization and disenchantment, Charles Taylor presented a systematic-historical account of the emergence of secularization from the Middle Ages onward in his *A Secular Age* (2007). He sees the strivings for reform in the late Middle Ages and the subsequent emergence of a substantive and independent natural realm, in contrast to an account of the natural realm as deeply imbued with the supernatural, as the original bedrock of secularity. Taylor essentially offers the pre-history of ascetic Protestantism. Weber, however, saw this movement in the ancient foundations of Judaism and in the Old Testament. He understood the push toward secularity as an inherent part of the religion itself; it was there from the beginning and it could always emerge under the right circumstances (as it did in Calvinism). In Weber's analysis, it is not born in the Middle Ages. Taylor's theory seems to draw upon the critical work done on the emergence of atheism and secular humanism by many intellectuals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these figures saw the intellectual trends of nominalism in the late Middle Ages as the fall from grace (such as Étienne Gilson, and many French Catholic intellectuals).<sup>58</sup> Another group of scholars have addressed this theme in the analysis of the emergence of modernity, the modern individual and modern natural science (especially Hans Blumenberg and Amos Funkenstein).<sup>59</sup> While the intellectual development of the late Middle Ages in the decline of Aristotelian scholasticism was a critical impetus in the emergence of modern thought, there is still a great distance between it and the trends of de-churchization in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1970s, for example, around 95% of the West German population still officially belonged to a church.

The "long" accounts of secularization – especially those that see domino-effects starting in the Middle Ages that lead to modern secularization – have been challenged in contemporary academic work. Many contemporary theorists of secularization focus on the significance of the social and cultural changes in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in the 1960s (see below). Nevertheless, some of these "long" accounts have shed light on the historical roots of modern thought in its various forms in the Enlightenment. Modern thought was the condition for the possibility of modern secular thought in the Western world, and, in a tertiary sense, the condition for the possibility of the emergence of modern secularization. In this regard, however, there is no direct line of necessary development from the Middle Age movements to modern de-churchization.

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<sup>56</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, of Harvard University Press, 2012). Regarding this book, see my "On Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*," in *Theologie.Geschichte: Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kulturgeschichte* 9 (2014), URL: [universaar.uni-saarland.de/journals/index.php/tg](http://universaar.uni-saarland.de/journals/index.php/tg)

<sup>57</sup> I have addressed this matter at length in my book, *Reformation in the Western World*, chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, of Harvard University Press, 2007); Taylor himself is critical of the modern individual, see idem, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Gregory Baum, "The response of a theologian to Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age,'" in *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), 363-381. Regarding Taylor, see Colin Jager, et al., ed., *Working with A Secular Age: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Charles Taylor's Master Narrative* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016); Jean-François Chanet and Denis Pelletier, ed., *Laïcité, séparation, sécularisation 1905-2005* [= *Vingtième siècle*, Nr. 87, 2005] (Paris: Presses de Sciences PO, 2005). See also my "Diagnosing Western Modernity: A Review Article," in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 57 (2015), 267-284.

<sup>59</sup> Further to these themes, see my "Diagnosing Western Modernity."

Hugh McLeod, Emeritus Professor of Church History at the University of Birmingham, provides a helpful summary of the decline of Christendom in Western Europe in four stages:

1. Toleration of alternative forms of Christianity (in the Reformation and post-Reformation era in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and onward).
2. Publication of literature that was critical of Christianity (in the Enlightenment era of the 18<sup>th</sup> century).
3. Separation of church and state (from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward).
4. The “gradual loosening of the ties between church and society” (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>60</sup>

McLeod describes the gradual trend as a movement:

[...] towards a society whose institutions and laws reflect a pluralism in which a wide variety of religious groups, as well as other people with a more secular orientation, each have their place. Other trends have been for the state to take over functions formerly performed by the church, and for trained professionals to take over roles that once belonged to priests, nuns, or others impelled by a sense of religious vocation.<sup>61</sup>

One of the explanations of the shift is linked to the transition from a religion of obligation to a religion of truly voluntary association. Here “truly voluntary” means that the unofficial cultural pressure to belong has greatly subsided. In free Western societies, this happened especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 established a new order in Europe. The violent religious conflicts of the Reformation era were resolved with a political order in which the princes and kings determined the religion of their territories: *Cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose region, his religion”). This term was developed later to describe the Peace of Augsburg. In this system, religion comes with the social and political order. Religion is more or less imposed on people from above. Political, social and cultural obligations came with this system that supported the religion. In essence, it made the religion flourish. As the argument goes, once the external obligations are taken away, the motivation for affiliation is also removed. For most Europeans, this became a true reality in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, the unofficial external obligations were essentially relaxed. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in many parts of the Western world (and especially in the urban centers), the church became a *truly* voluntary organization to which one was neither officially nor unofficially required to belong. Of course, in many parts of the Western world today, there are still unofficial cultural obligations to belong to the church. These pockets of traditionalism (usually in rural areas) are, however, now the exception and no longer the rule.

When viewed through this lens, the background of secularization is not to be found in the Middle Ages or the Reformation, but in the process of modernization and especially industrialization which destabilized traditional society and abolished this unofficial obligation. With regard to the German context, for example, Hartmut Barend claims that the developments toward the secularization of society primarily go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He also points to the later processes of industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the loss of Christian influence in the labor movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Prussian cultural, social and political traditions of liberalism (“In meinem Staate kann jeder nach seiner Façon selig werden.” “In my state everyone can become blessed according to his own fashion/ in his own way.” Frederick the Great, 1740).<sup>62</sup> McLeod has also drawn attention to

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<sup>60</sup> Hugh McLeod, “Introduction,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-26, here: 5. See also Hugh McLeod, “The Crisis of Christianity in the West: Entering a Post-Christian Era?” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianity c. 1914 – c. 2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 323-347. See also Marcello Neri, “Nach dem Ende der Institutionen der Moderne: Christentum und Europa: ein gemeinsames Schicksal,” in *Europa mit oder ohne Religion?: der Beitrag der Religion zum gegenwärtigen und künftigen Europa*, ed. Kurt Appel, et al. (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2014), 183-203.

<sup>61</sup> McLeod, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>62</sup> Hartmut Barend, “Konfessionslosigkeit – die missionarische Herausforderung der Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert,” in *Die so genannten Konfessionslosen und die Mission der Kirche*, ed. Ulrich Laepple and Volker Roschke

this trend in the modern period. He argues that the late 19<sup>th</sup> century developments of industrialization in Germany and the emergence of socialism contributed to the movement away from organized religion.<sup>63</sup> The developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also play a central role in Owen Chadwick's account of secularization. Here the focus is laid more on the emergence of Enlightenment thought and specifically a new plurality of opinion: "From the moment that European opinion decided for toleration, it decided for an eventual free market in opinion. [...] A free market in some opinions became a free market in all opinions."<sup>64</sup> Clearly, there is a strong argument to be made regarding the significance of the shifts in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Without the later catalysts and fermenting energies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, these older cultural, social and economic forces may have never had the effect that they did.

### 3.2. The 20<sup>th</sup> century and the "crisis of the 1960s"

These 19<sup>th</sup> century movements, as addressed above, did not bring about an immediate and massive exodus from the churches. They rather contributed to the destabilization or transformation of traditional society and traditional obligations. These antecedent causes of secularization that McLeod and Chadwick address realize themselves in Western culture not in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century, or even the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rather, for the first time, on a large scale, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after World War II. Fascism was a radical rejection of the Enlightenment trends of human liberation and autonomy. The emphasis on ethnic identities and political ideologies functioned as corrective instruments; they challenged the individualizing tendencies of the Enlightenment, as well as the transformative effects of the modern economy and social change. With the destruction of fascism in World War II, the Western world became far more liberal and progressive. After the war, the open society of modern liberalism became the ideal among many intellectuals. This was a rejection of the closed society of fascism. This shift happened especially in the 1960s. This cultural and social dynamic also contributed to the movement away from traditional religious structures and worldviews. Intellectuals were not the ones to drive this force, however. It was a broad social shift that had a natural reactive development following the "age of extremes."

With regard to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many authors have focused on the cultural shifts in the 1960s as a key transitional period. Callum G. Brown holds that the "crisis of the 1960s" in terms of Christian religion and the status of Christian churches in society was a unique development in church history. The "secularisation of the period should be regarded as mostly a sudden and shocking event, based on external threats, and reflected in the churches dividing between liberals and conservatives in ways that were to become ever more militant as the century wore on."<sup>65</sup> He adds, "The modern collapse of Christian culture and practice in Europe is surely one of the greatest of historical changes."<sup>66</sup> McLeod is one of the forerunners of the analysis of the changes in the 1960s or the "long 1960s" (1958 to 1975, a term from Arthur Marwick). He observes that a radical transition swept across the Western world, "In the religious history of the West these years may come to be seen as

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(Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2007), 15-25, here: 17. See also Andrea König, ed., *Christliche Existenz in einer überwiegend nicht-christlichen Umgebung: Situationsbeschreibung, Initiativen und Perspektiven für die Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2008). Hubertus Schönemann, "Heutige Herausforderungen der Pastoral in Ostdeutschland: aus der Perspektive der Arbeitsstelle für missionarische Pastoral in Erfurt," in *Diakonia* 45 (2014), 245-253.

<sup>63</sup> Hugh McLeod, "Protestantism and the Working Class in Imperial Germany," in *European Studies Review* 12 (1982), 323-344.

<sup>64</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 21.

<sup>65</sup> Callum G. Brown, "What was the religious crisis of the 1960s?" in *Journal of Religious History* 34 (2010), 468-479, here: 468.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

marking a rupture as profound as that brought about by the Reformation.”<sup>67</sup> Among other things, he points to a drastic drop in church membership, the number of clergy and religious professions and church attendance. In the “long 1960s” and after them, he identifies secularization in various areas in the broader social and political realm and also in terms of individual beliefs and practices. These broad trends led to the end of Christendom. Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead have called this whole process the “decline of paternalism” with reference to the British context.<sup>68</sup> The “interlocking set of authorities” (including the church), which disciplined practices and social order, fell apart after the 1960s: “Sometime in the 1970s, they collapsed like a pack of cards.”<sup>69</sup> As the old “class structure fell, as it seemed to under Mrs Thatcher, it brought the bishops down with it.”<sup>70</sup>

The trends of de-churchization in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany have been carefully documented by Thomas Großbölting, Professor for Contemporary History at the University of Münster. He analyzed this in his book *The Lost Heaven: Faith in Germany since 1945*. There he shows how the old alliance between religion and society around 1900 was maintained well into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>71</sup> There was a tacit agreement between society at large and the churches that stretched into the 1950s. This overlap is seen in basic views regarding the order of society, the roles of men and women, the understandings of sexuality, the family and the raising of children. Even most people who did not belong to churches (which was a relatively small cross section of society) continued to endorse these basic moral viewpoints around 1950 in Germany. 50 years later, however, the situation is quite different. Around the year 2000, the general overlap between society and churches was no longer identifiable. Großbölting claims that the old culturally established status of the religion cannot be reestablished today.<sup>72</sup> That which was the moral and religious norm in the 1950s had become, already in the 1970s, simply one option among many. This historical development can be observed in many Western countries.

In the mid-1950s in Germany, the religious domain of public consciousness – a domain that the traditional Christian churches dominated through the 1950s – began to undergo a process of pluralization with new media channels and new and popular figures.<sup>73</sup> Alternative cultural groups emerged in society and in politics (for example, with the Green Party). Many of these groups and movements rejected or strongly challenged the traditional cultural norms of sexual rules, moral expectations and traditional career paths. Political engagement, not the family and traditional community around the church, became more important for the younger generations as the centering point of cultural and social self-identification. With this change came an acceleration of the number of people leaving the churches. Entirely new theological approaches also emerged in faculties of theology in the wake of post-modernism and liberation movements, such as a new feminist approach to religion. Indeed, *Time Magazine* even published a cover with the question “Is God Dead?” on April 8, 1966.<sup>74</sup> As Großbölting emphasizes, some of these trends were already emerging in the 1950s. Yet they become more visible in the decades to come. The language that pastors used for church members also changed in the wake of the 1960s. Now they could even be

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<sup>67</sup> McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 264f. Cf. Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape, ed., *Secularisation in the Christian World: Essays in honour of Hugh McLeod* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> Brown and Woodhead, *That was the church, that was*, 64.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>71</sup> See Thomas Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel. Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2013); see also Ulrich Laepple and Volker Roschke, ed., *Die so genannten Konfessionslosen und die Mission der Kirche* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2007); Walter Hoeres, “Rätsel der Verkündigung: die Neuevangelisierung findet nicht statt,” in *Una-Voce-Korrespondenz* 41 (2011), 65-75.

<sup>72</sup> He uses the term “irrecoverable” (“unwiederbringlich”): Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel*, 17.

<sup>73</sup> Großbölting uses the term “religious field,” cf. Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” transl. Craig Calhoun, in *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991), 1-44. See also Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*, 19, 51.

<sup>74</sup> This issue was discussed in Germany as this time, see Heinrich Fries and Rudolf Staehlin, *Gott ist tot? Eine Herausforderung - zwei Theologen antworten* (Munich: Südwest-Verlag, 1968).



called “seekers,” rather than just the pastor’s “sheep.” After the fall of the Berlin Wall, religion did not spread into former East Germany in the 1990s. Today it is one of the most secular places in the Western world. As Eberhard Tiefensee has claimed, East Germans even have little interest in the Dalai Lama.<sup>75</sup> Pointing to statistical data on the religious situation in former East Germany, Michael Herbst claims that 98 percent of children who grow up in homes where there is no confession remain without a confession as adults.<sup>76</sup> While there is a lot of talk about religion and its importance among intellectuals today, this should not be confused, as Großbölting rightly argues, with a resurgence of traditional Christian faith. The new trends of pluralistic and individualistic religious expression should also be, as he correctly argues, clearly differentiated from the older faith and religious establishment of Christianity in the past generations. This older established Christianity, something that was deeply embedded in culture and society, is what he calls the “lost heaven.”

#### 4. Sociological Analysis of the Decline

Many statistical and sociological studies show that established Christianity is in decline across the Western world.<sup>77</sup> Drawing upon missiological data from 2001, Werner Ustorf, Professor of Mission Studies at the University of Birmingham, holds that around 7,600 Christians leave Christianity every day in the West.<sup>78</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart claim that “*rich societies are becoming more secular but the world as a whole is becoming more religious.*”<sup>79</sup> While this claim is true on the whole, there are, in fact, many strong religious communities that exist within these rich societies that are not in decline. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, many established churches across the

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<sup>75</sup> Eberhard Tiefensee, “Homo areligiosus: Überlegungen zur Entkonfessionalisierung in der ehemaligen DDR,” in *Gottlose Jahre?: Rückblicke auf die Kirche im Sozialismus der DDR*, ed. Thomas A. Seidel (Leipzig: Evang. Verl.-Anst., 2002), 197-215; idem, “Areligiosität: Annäherung an ein Phänomen,” in *Die so genannten Konfessionslosen und die Mission der Kirche* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2007), 66-77.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Herbst, “Finden hier gelegentlich auch noch Gottesdienste statt?” in *Die so genannten Konfessionslosen und die Mission der Kirche*, ed. Ulrich Laepple and Volker Roschke (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2007), 101-112, here: 105.

<sup>77</sup> See Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation” (Oct. 9, 2012), 31. For some of the contemporary debate on this subject, see also: David Martin, *On secularization: Towards a revised general theory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005); Rob Warner, *Secularization and its discontents* (London: Continuum, 2010); Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001); Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); idem, “Late Secularization and Religion as Alien,” in *Open Theology* 1 (2014), 13-23; Grace Davie, “Religion in 21st-century Europe: framing the debate,” in *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 78 (2013), 279-293; Eva Hamberg, Rodney Stark and Alan S. Miller, “Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan,” in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20 (2005), 3-23; Eva Hamberg, “Christendom in Decline: the Swedish Case,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47-62; Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, “Umstrittene Säkularisierung,” in *Stimmen der Zeit* 231 (2013), 137-140; Claude Langlois, “Déchristianisation, sécularisation et vitalité religieuse. Débats de sociologues et pratiques d'historiens,” in *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. Lehmann, 154-173; Timothy Larsen, “Dechristendomization as an alternative to secularization: theology, history, and sociology in conversation,” in *Pro ecclesia* 15 (2006), 320-337; Hartmut Lehmann, “Secularization, transformation of religion, or the return of religion: Three competing concepts for explaining the role of religion in the modern world,” in *Religion im kulturellen Diskurs / Religion in Cultural Discourse*, ed. Brigitte Luchesi and Kocku von Stuckrad (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 327-335; idem, “Zwischen Dechristianisierung und Rechristianisierung: Fragen und Anmerkungen zur Bedeutung des Christentums in Europa und in Nordamerika im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert,” in *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 11 (1998), 156-168.

<sup>78</sup> Werner Ustorf, “A Missiological Postscript,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (see above), 218-225, here: 219f. He holds that in Africa 23,000 people become Christian every day. His source is David B. Barrett, et al., ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: Vol. 1: The World by Countries: Religionists, Churches, Ministries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>79</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 217. Emphasis in the original.

Western world, and some of the cultures that they created, did go into steady trends of decline. This phenomenon can be identified in many national contexts.

#### 4.1. United States

Church membership numbers, general knowledge of the Christian religion and the use of Christian rites of passage are all in trends of decline today. This fact is widely recognized in the European context. As briefly addressed above, recent studies have shown that established Christianity is also declining in America. Of course, some studies show that evangelical (including Pentecostal) churches are growing. Yet these groups are not representative of the majority.<sup>80</sup> A report from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2014, shows that the American public sees the influence of religion in the United States in dramatic decline: “Nearly three-quarters of the public (72 percent) now thinks religion is losing influence in American life, up 5 percentage points from 2010 to the highest level in Pew Research polling over the past decade.”<sup>81</sup> This analysis seems to be confirmed by election data. In the United States, the share of the “religiously unaffiliated” in the total electorate has been growing from year to year. In 2000 it was 9 percent; 2004: 10 percent; 2008: 12 percent; 2012: 12 percent; 2016: 15 percent. Nevertheless, 75 percent of the electorate in 2016 was still Christian (Catholic or Protestant).<sup>82</sup> While the influence of religion is perceived to be in decline in American society, the number of non-affiliated persons is growing. A report from the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2012, shows that the “nones” – people without any religious affiliation – are growing rapidly. In 2012, one-fifth of the United States’ population did not have a religious affiliation. A Harris Poll of 2,250 adults surveyed online in November of 2013 showed that Americans’ belief in God is in decline.<sup>83</sup> There seems to be a correlation between decline in church attendance and the level of education (which is associated with privileged circumstances): less educated people drop out of church sooner and the more educated tend to be more religious.<sup>84</sup>

If one only analyzes people in the United States that are 30 years old or younger, the number of the unaffiliated jumps to around 33 percent. From 2007 to 2012, with view to adults, this increased from 15 percent to 20 percent.<sup>85</sup> From 1972 to 2010, roughly 40 years, the overall number of Protestants of any kind in the United States went from around 62 percent of the population down to 51 percent.<sup>86</sup> Most of the losses within Protestant churches are in the mainline churches. Of all the Protestants in the United States, only half of them (54 percent) see themselves as having a strong religious identity.<sup>87</sup> There is a major difference here in comparison to the Catholics in the United States. Of all the Catholics in the United States, only a quarter of the Catholics (27 percent) see themselves as having a strong religious identity.<sup>88</sup> In 2012, in the American population as a whole, the “strong” Catholics and the “strong” Protestants combined only made up 34 percent of

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<sup>80</sup> Regarding the American context, see Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Mark Chaves and Shawna Anderson, “Continuity and Change in American Religion, 1972-2008,” in *Social Trends in the American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972*, ed. Peter V. Marsden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 212-239; Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, ed., *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> Pew Research Center, “Public Sees Religion’s Influence Waning,” *Pew Research Center* (Sept. 22, 2014), 1.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martínez, “How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis,” *Pew Research Center* (November 9, 2016), [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Larry Shannon-Missal (Harris Poll Research Manager), “Americans’ Belief in God, Miracles and Heaven Declines” (December 16, 2013), [harrisinteractive.com](http://harrisinteractive.com)

<sup>84</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, Andrew J. Cherlin, Jeremy E. Uecker, and Matthew Messel, “No Money, No Honey, No Church: The Deinstitutionalization of Religious Life Among the White Working Class,” in *Religion, Work, and Inequality*, vol. 23, ed. Lisa Keister et al. (Bingley: Emerald, 2012), 227-250.

<sup>85</sup> Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. Here the Pew Research Center draws from the *General Social Surveys, 1972-2010*.

<sup>87</sup> Pew Research Center, “‘Strong’ Catholic Identity at a Four-Decade Low in U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org) (March 13, 2013), 1.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

the total population.<sup>89</sup> The rate of church attendance among Catholics is in decline.<sup>90</sup> Based upon these statistics, it is relatively safe to claim that the sense of identification with the established Christian churches in the United States is in decline. One of the only churches in the United States to report growth in 2013 was the Assemblies of God (Pentecostal), which grew 1.8 percent. It now has around 3 million members. Its growth may be in part because of its Spanish-language ministry.<sup>91</sup> Some old strongholds of conservative evangelicalism are entering negative trends. The large Southern Baptist Convention's total membership declined almost 1 percent (0.86 percent) from 2012 to 2013. This is a loss of 135,764 members (from 15,872,404 to 15,735,640) in one year.<sup>92</sup> Around the same time, from 2010 to 2013, the population of Kentucky (where the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is located) grew 1.3 percent.<sup>93</sup> In order to counterbalance a massive budget deficit, the Southern Baptist Convention announced in 2015 that they will be cutting over 600 missionaries and staff members.

A recent Pew Study ("America's Changing Religious Landscape") published in May, 2015, states, "The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing".<sup>94</sup> According to the study, as of 2014, 25.4 percent of the United States population is "Evangelical Protestant," 22.8 percent is "Unaffiliated," 20.8 percent is "Catholic," 14.7 percent is "Mainline Protestant" and 5.9 percent is "Non-Christian faiths." From 2007 to 2014, the share of the United States population that is "Christian" in general fell from 78.4 percent to 70.6 percent. While the number of evangelical Christians ("including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church in America, other evangelical denominations and many nondenominational congregations") has grown by 2 million adherents from 2007 to 2014, their share of the United States population fell from 26.3 percent (in 2007) to 25.4 percent (in 2014). In the same time frame, "mainline Protestants" lost around 5 million members (41.1 million to 36 million), Catholics lost around 3 million and the "unaffiliated" grew by around 19 million (to a total of around 55.8 million). The study points to the broad factors of "generational replacement" as pushing the trends forward. Younger generations are less religious and more likely to be "nones" or "non-affiliated." The "nones" already make up approximately 28 percent of the population in the western part of the United States. Using a "stage of decline framework," the sociologists Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme see "religious nones" on the rise and "expect irreligious socialization to gradually take the lead in explaining rising religious none figures".<sup>95</sup>

The 62 million evangelical Protestants in the United States, the "new-mainline," make up the majority (55 percent) of all Protestants in the United States. It is likely that the substantial growth (around 2 million) of this group in the last seven years is related in part to the growing Hispanic population in the United States, the growth of the Pentecostal churches (which the study categorizes as "evangelical Protestant"), and the congregational transfer from "mainline" churches to evangelical churches. As evangelicals tend to promote traditional family models and also tend to encourage families to "be fruitful and multiply," it is likely that a portion of their numeric stability is also related to reproduction and the religious upbringing of children (which they usually take very seriously).

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 6f.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>91</sup> Mark I. Pinsky, "Assemblies of God posts impressive numbers," in *Christian Century* 130/18 (Sept. 4, 2013), 15.

<sup>92</sup> See *Annual Church Profile Statistical Summary*, LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville, Tenn., May 21, 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Census Bureau's Population Estimates (USA), July 1, 2013, see census.gov.

<sup>94</sup> Pew Research Center, Alan Cooperman (Director of Religion Research), Gregory Smith (Associate Director, Research), "America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow," *Pew Research Center*, pewforum.org (May 12, 2015), 3-16.

<sup>95</sup> Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, "Becoming a Religious None: Irreligious Socialization and Disaffiliation," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2017), forthcoming in vol. 56.

Some of the evangelical Protestant churches may be rightly understood as culturally and socially “established” (such as the Southern Baptists in many southern states in the United States), while others are probably best understood as non-established or only minimally established.<sup>96</sup> Many “evangelical Protestants” (to use the Pew Study term) do not fulfill the definition of “established Christianity” as addressed above. Many of them encourage a posture of opposition towards the program of cultural and social establishment and prefer to see themselves as “not of this world” as opposed to their liberal brothers and sisters in the mainline churches (who greatly embraced “the world” in the post 1960s era). Of course, many evangelicals have worked to reform society. In recent history, the conservative “Moral Majority” (or “Moral Minority”) is a prominent example of this.<sup>97</sup> This movement was marked by deep opposition to the liberalizing trends of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in American culture (which liberal Protestants supported). Some of the recent trends in American evangelicalism towards “post-evangelicalism” or a new “emergent Christianity” are rejecting these older habits within evangelicalism. These new streams are attempting to embed the religion into the surrounding culture and society and to understand Christianity as very much a part of “this world.” These impulses are seen for example in the emphasis on the “new parish” and “neighborhood” themes among younger evangelicals who are rediscovering “community.”<sup>98</sup>

While holding that “liberal religion is precarious,” Bruce suggests that European-like trends of secularization are emerging in America. He writes, “conservative sects are becoming more liberal and liberal denominations are declining.”<sup>99</sup> One example of this is the Lutherans in America. In 2013 there were around 7 million Lutherans of various denominations in the United States (around 2 percent of the population). The largest denomination of Lutherans in the United States is the (liberal leaning) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In 1988 there were 5.2 million members of the ELCA; in 2013 this fell to 3.9 million members. This is a loss of around 25 percent in 25 years (in part caused by some conservative churches leaving the ELCA). The most recent membership numbers from the Episcopal Church (USA) show a dramatic picture of decline. From 2004 to 2014 there has been an almost “25 percent drop in the average Sunday attendance” and over half of Episcopal parishes, 53 percent, “have seen a decline in average Sunday attendance of at least 10 percent in the last five years.” This trend is seen at the parish level and at the level of overall membership: “The Episcopal Church has seen an 18.8 percent drop in overall membership, including churches outside the United States, from 2004 to 2014.”<sup>100</sup>

According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study, the Episcopal Church (USA) comes in last place for church member participation levels. Approximately one in ten members (13 percent) of the church are “highly involved.” By contrast, half of the members of the growing evangelical Pentecostal Assemblies of God churches are “highly involved.” Here “involvement” means “membership in a congregation, frequency of attendance at worship services and frequency of attendance at small group religious activities.”<sup>101</sup> The decline of established liberal mainline Protestant churches in the United States also has to do with their failure to adjust to the changing ethnic composition of the American populace.

A recent sociological research project tested how various churches in the United States

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<sup>96</sup> On this theme, see Timothy Larsen’s essay below.

<sup>97</sup> Richard V. Pierard, “Why the ‘Moral Minority’ Could Not Become a Majority: Observations of a Participant-Observer,” in *Fides et historia* 47/1 (2015), 101-106.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2014).

<sup>99</sup> Steve Bruce, “The Demise of Christianity in Britain,” in *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular, and Alternative Futures*, ed. Grace Davie, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (Aldershot: Ashgate Pub., 2003), 53-63, here: 62.

<sup>100</sup> Adelle M. Banks, “Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry recovering from surgery,” in *Religion News* (December 9, 2015), religionnews.com

<sup>101</sup> Aleksandra Sandstrom and Becka A. Alper, “Church involvement varies widely among U.S. Christians,” *Pew Research Center* (November 16, 2015), pewresearch.org. This statistic is not included in Pew’s “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” study. It is a combination and analysis of this study.

respond to email inquiries from potentially new church members (3,120 emails were sent for the study). In these emails, the potential members were presented as seeking a new church and their names were changed to reflect “different racial and ethnic associations.” The study concludes: “In response to these inquiries, representatives from mainline Protestant churches – who generally embrace liberal, egalitarian attitudes toward race relations – actually demonstrated the most discriminatory behavior.” Liberal Protestants “responded most frequently to emails with white-sounding names, somewhat less frequently to black- or Hispanic-sounding names, and much less to Asian-sounding names. They also sent shorter, less welcoming responses to nonwhite names.” By contrast, “evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches showed little variation across treatment groups in their responses.”<sup>102</sup> These developments are having a dramatic effect on mainline Protestant educational institutions. Many mainline seminaries are closing their old campuses.<sup>103</sup> While pastoral ministry is important for an analysis of these trends, there are other broad social dynamics at work which work against the older established churches. Chaves reports:

All things considered, I think that religion [in the United States] is slowing down, in decline, because of the fact that, looking at change, everything is clearly going in the decline direction. Let me give an example: One of the indicators is the 18 percent of people [in America] who say they have no religion. Ask them, “What’s your religion?” and they say, “Nothing, I have no religion.” More than 80 percent of Americans do. In comparison to the rest of the world, that’s a significant number. But in the 1950s, it was 3 percent who had no religion. Those kind of examples, wherever you look, show change in that kind of direction.<sup>104</sup>

Chaves’s claim is supported by other studies. Hannah Fingerhut has provided the following comments on a recent study of this matter: “Since 2010, Millennials’ rating of churches and other religious organizations has dipped 18 percentage points: 55 percent now [in 2015] say churches have a positive impact on the country compared with five years ago, when nearly three-quarters (73 percent) said this.”<sup>105</sup> In the American case, the Pew Study suggests these four possible theses as an explanation of the decline:<sup>106</sup>

1. It may be a “Political Backlash,” meaning young people abandon religion because it is too close to conservative (Republican) politics.<sup>107</sup>
2. “Delays in Marriage,” which are common among the younger generations, often go together with lower levels of identification with religious groups.<sup>108</sup>

On this point, the Pew Study claims:

On the other hand, an analysis of religious affiliation patterns by generation, previously published by the Pew Forum, suggests that Americans do not generally become more affiliated as they move through the life cycle from young adulthood through marriage, parenting, middle age and retirement. Rather, the percentage of people in each

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<sup>102</sup> Bradley R. E. Wright, et al. “Religion, Race, and Discrimination: A Field Experiment of How American Churches Welcome Newcomers,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54/2 (2015), 185-204, here: 185.

<sup>103</sup> G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “Oldest US graduate seminary to close campus,” in *Religion News* (November 13, 2015), religionnews.com

<sup>104</sup> Chandra Swanson and Mark Chaves, “Q&A with Mark Chaves,” in *Duke Chronicle* (August 31, 2011), dukechronicle.com. Regarding these trends, see Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*.

<sup>105</sup> Hannah Fingerhut, “Millennials’ views of news media, religious organizations grow more negative,” *Pew Research Center* (January 4, 2016), pewresearch.org. This survey conducted from August to October 2015.

<sup>106</sup> Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” 29-32. Cf. David D. Hall, “Religion and Secularization in America. A Cultural Approach,” in *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. Lehmann, 118-130.

<sup>107</sup> The Pew Study points to Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” in *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002), 165-190.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

generation who are religiously affiliated has remained stable, or decreased slightly, as that generation has aged.<sup>109</sup>

It continues with these two points:

3. Trends of “Broad Social Disengagement.”<sup>110</sup>

4. “Secularization,” which seems to follow in “healthy, wealthy” and “orderly” societies.<sup>111</sup>

The United States was once a counterexample held against the dominant story of European secularization. Today America seems to be more European when it comes to trends of declining established Christianity. While there are some similarities in this regard, there are remaining differences. On the whole, America is still much more religious than Europe. Furthermore, a much larger cross-section of the American population is evangelical Protestant.

#### 4.2. Germany

Just over half of the German population is still Christian today, Catholic or Protestant.<sup>112</sup> This number shrinks from year to year. 50 years ago, almost the entire West German population belonged to a church. Detlef Pollack, Professor of the Sociology of Religion at the University of Münster, and other sociologists of religion in Germany, such as Gert Pickel, have demonstrated that established Christianity in Germany is in steady decline. From year to year, the number of Christians shrinks in Germany. While there are massive cross-sections of German society that still belong to the large Catholic and Protestant churches (23 million Catholics, 22 million Protestants), the internal demographics reflect that churchgoers tend to be close to retirement or already retired. Some of the sociological literature has addressed this challenge today by referring to the challenges of the “seniors’ church.” Other studies show that the younger the nominal church member is, the weaker his or her level of commitment to the religion. All across Germany, north to south, east to west, the trend is one of decline, church membership losses and steady administrative reductions, often called “orderly shrinking.” The programs that organize the pastoral cuts over the years are sometimes called “growing together.” This means that the church congregations in small towns will have to “grow together,” or, more precisely, “merge together,” as the reduced budgets force them to share pastors. The churches are still very visible in society, but there is a slow-moving process of *Entkirchlichung*, or “de-churchization” of society, taking place. The churches are trying to respond

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<sup>109</sup> Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” p. 16. Here the study refers to Pew Research Center, February 17, 2010, “Religion Among the Millennials.” See [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org).

<sup>110</sup> Here the Study refers to Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2000); as the Pew Study points out, Putnam and David E. Campbell also point to changing “moral and social beliefs” in *American Grace: How religion divides and unites us* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 127.

<sup>111</sup> Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” p. 31. The study draws upon Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 216f.

<sup>112</sup> Detlef Pollack, “Säkularisierung auf dem Vormarsch,” in *Zeitzeichen* 13/9 Sept. (2012), 14-16, here: 15. See Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller and Gert Pickel, ed., *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe: Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012); Detlef Pollack, *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos?: Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); idem, *Religion und gesellschaftliche Differenzierung: Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Europa und den USA III* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016); Martin Greschat, “Rechristianisierung und Säkularisierung: Anmerkungen aus deutscher protestantischer Sicht,” in *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. Lehmann, 76-85; idem, “‘Unterschätzte Säkularisierung’: ein Gespräch mit dem Religionssoziologen Detlef Pollack,” in *Herder-Korrespondenz* 52 (1998), 612-617; idem, “Religiöser Wandel in Ost- und Westeuropa: soziologische Beschreibungen und Erklärungen,” in *Europa mit oder ohne Religion?: der Beitrag der Religion zum gegenwärtigen und künftigen Europa*, ed. Kurt Appel, et al. (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2014), 93-120. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter: Religion in der modernen Kultur* (München: Beck, 2007). See also my article “The Decline of Established Christianity in Germany: Contemporary History and Protestant Responses,” in *Religion – Staat – Gesellschaft: Zeitschrift für Glaubensformen und Weltanschauungen/ Journal for the Study of Beliefs and Worldviews* 16/1-2 (2015), 181-215.

creatively, but the challenges are enormous. Every year, thousands of members resign their membership. Around 182,000 people left the Catholic Church in Germany in 2015, while around 210,000 people left the large regional Protestant churches in Germany in the same year. Add these numbers together and they amount to the size of a mid-sized German city, comparable to the population of Bochum or Wuppertal. By contrast, the very small evangelical German Federation of Free Churches (*Der Bund Freier Evangelischer Gemeinden*) is growing in terms of membership and congregations. From 2006 to 2015, they started 69 new congregations.<sup>113</sup> On the scale of the German population, however, this is a very small group. The broad trend in Germany has been outlined with extensive literature: aging churches and steady waves of church membership resignations. While there are many baptisms of young children, the churches are still trying to solve the long-term problems of church connection. Many young people resign their church membership after they get their first professional position, in order to avoid the church tax. There are also very low levels of commitment among younger church members.

#### 4.3. United Kingdom

There is also strong evidence of a “de-churchization” in the United Kingdom. According to the multi-faith British study group, the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life (Corab), “The proportion of people [in the United Kingdom, PSP] who do not follow a religion has risen from just under a third in 1983 to almost half in 2014”. Today, “two in five British people now identify as Christian”. Many people in the United Kingdom are moving “away from mainstream denominations to evangelical and Pentecostal churches.” According to Ed Kessler, the vice-chair of the study group, “It’s an anomaly to have 26 Anglican bishops in the House of Lords. There needs to be better representation of the different religions and beliefs in Britain today.”<sup>114</sup>

In 2003, Steve Bruce declared, “Christianity in Britain is in serious decline.”<sup>115</sup> Drawing upon sociological data, he argues that in the United Kingdom the “church form of religion cannot return” and that there will be “no national revival of shared religious identity.”<sup>116</sup> By the year 2030, “Christianity in Britain will have largely disappeared. Total Christian church membership will be below 5 percent, as will church attendance.”<sup>117</sup> He states, “Britain in 2030 will be a secular society.”<sup>118</sup> Following the trends out to 2030, he writes that the “proportion of people describing themselves as Christian will have fallen to below 20 percent of the population.”<sup>119</sup> With these predictions he is “doing nothing more than continuing the trends that have been clear and stable for 50 years.”<sup>120</sup>

Remarking on the long-term outlook of the Church of England, and drawing upon the work of church commissioners, Brown and Woodhead write in a publication from 2016: “If present trends continued, there would be only 150,000 churchgoing Anglicans left in England by 2050.”<sup>121</sup> North American Anglicans (Episcopalians) made up a mere three percent of the worldwide communion of Anglicanism in 2010. Anglicanism in Australia has also entered a trend of overall decline. The church is also overly represented by older members in Australia.<sup>122</sup> There are some growing Anglican

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<sup>113</sup> See *idea-Spektrum Magazin*, Nr. 40 (October 6, 2016), 35.

<sup>114</sup> Jonathan Owen, “Britain is no longer just a Christian country, says major report,” *Independent*, December 7, 2015, [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bishops-in-house-of-lords-should-make-way-for-leaders-of-other-religions-a6762821.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bishops-in-house-of-lords-should-make-way-for-leaders-of-other-religions-a6762821.html)

<sup>115</sup> Steve Bruce, “The Demise of Christianity in Britain,” in *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular, and Alternative Futures*, ed. Grace Davie, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (Aldershot: Ashgate Pub., 2003), 53-63, here: 56. Cf. idem, *God is Dead*.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Brown and Woodhead, *That was the church, that was*, 211.

<sup>122</sup> David Goodhew, ed., *Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion: 1980 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2017). The Anglican Communion continues to grow or maintain its status in the non-Western world.

congregations in urban centers of the Western world. In many cases, these are supported by immigrant communities.

According to the “Statistics for Mission 2014” from the Research and Statistics Department of the Archbishops’ Council (published in 2016), in 2014 only 4.3 percent of the population (2.4 million people) of those people who live within the dioceses of the Church of England participated in a Christmas service of the Church of England.<sup>123</sup> The percentage of the same population which is classified under “usual Sunday attendance” was 1.4 percent in 2014. According to the study, “there has been a steady decline in Church of England attendance of 10-15 percent over the past decade.”<sup>124</sup> The Department also keeps track of the “the worshipping community”. This includes “any person attending the church regularly, for example at least once a month (or those who would attend if not prevented by illness, infirmity, or temporary absence), including attendance at church services and fresh expressions of church”.<sup>125</sup> In 2014, “the worshipping community of the Church of England was 1.1 million people, of whom 20 percent were aged under 18 and 29 percent over 70.”<sup>126</sup>

The Church of Scotland is in a similar situation. It went from 535,834 members in 2004 to 380,163 in 2014.<sup>127</sup> At the end of 2015, membership was 352,912.<sup>128</sup> According to Brierley Consultancy’s “Scottish Church Census” (2016), there has been a consistent decline in Scottish church attendance over the last three decades. Indeed, “The number of people who regularly attend church services in Scotland has fallen by more than half over the last 30 years”. According to the report, which gives a picture of all churchgoers in Scotland, “42% of churchgoers were aged over 65.” Yet there are some signs of growth in the realm of non-established religion: “Attendance among the Pentecostals has doubled since 2002 and now stands at 19,000, making up 5% of all churchgoers in Scotland.” Furthermore, “12,000 people regularly attend around 300 new churches started since 2002.” While the established church traditions are disappearing, “Researchers said many immigrant churches and so-called ‘Messy Churches,’ which are more informal gatherings, account for much of the new growth.”<sup>129</sup> The growth in the Pentecostal and the emergent churches (the “Messy Churches”) is significant. On the whole, however, it is a very small cross-section of Scottish society.

#### 4.4. The Netherlands and Scandinavia

In 1966 in the Netherlands, 47 percent of the population was theist, 31 percent believed in a higher power, 16 percent was agnostic and 6 percent was atheist. In 2015, 14 percent was theist, 28 percent believed in a higher power, 34 percent was agnostic and 24 percent was atheist.<sup>130</sup> Weekly church attendance fell below 5 percent in many parts of Scandinavia in the 1990s.<sup>131</sup> In 1980, 93 percent of the population of Sweden belonged to the Church of Sweden. In 2015, this number dropped to 65 percent, with only around 1 percent of these nominal members attending Sunday church services. According to a study from 2015, only 36 percent of the members believe that the church should be proclaiming the Christian message.<sup>132</sup> The preliminary statistics for 2016 indicate that 85,848 people left the Church of Sweden in that year. In 2015, 46,895 resigned their

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<sup>123</sup> Archbishops’ Council, Research and Statistics Department, “Statistics for Mission 2014” (London, 2016), 29 (Table 10).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 6. See also the recent study on the Church of England from Brown and Woodhead, *That was the church, that was*.

<sup>127</sup> The Church of Scotland, *Living Stones: The Church of Scotland General Assembly 2015* (Edinburgh: The Church of Scotland Assembly Arrangements Committee, 2015), ch. 6, pg. 12.

<sup>128</sup> The Church of Scotland, *People of the Way: The Church of Scotland General Assembly 2016* (Edinburgh: The Church of Scotland Assembly Arrangements Committee, 2016), ch. 4, pg. 51.

<sup>129</sup> These citations are drawn from a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) report that summarized the study: “Dramatic drop in church attendance in Scotland,” 16 April 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-39613631> The report can be found at [www.brierleyconsultancy.com/scottish-church-census](http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/scottish-church-census).

<sup>130</sup> Ton Bernts and Joantine Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016).

<sup>131</sup> McLeod, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>132</sup> See Eva M. Hamberg’s essay below.



membership.<sup>133</sup> The Church of Norway, a Lutheran church, recently introduced an online church membership resignation procedure. The church then lost over 25,000 members in the course of one month.<sup>134</sup> Around 37 percent of the Norwegian population believes in God. Yet this general belief in God should not be translated to mean strong support of church or affirmation of classic Christian theological positions.

#### 4.5. France

In France, from 1958 to 1990, Catholic baptisms fell from 91 percent to 51 percent and Catholic weddings fell from 79 percent to 51 percent. As McLeod remarks, these shifts reflect a “substantial section of the population rejecting any kind of Christian identity, however tenuous”.<sup>135</sup> While the hard-core group of faithful Catholics (who attend mass regularly) has virtually disappeared in France, the soft periphery is also in dramatic decline. In 2009, the self-described “practicing” Catholics – those who attend church “regularly” or “occasionally” (“régulièrement,” “occasionnellement”) – made up only 15 percent of the total French population.<sup>136</sup> While actual participation is quite low, the churchgoing population is also aging in France. Only around 23 percent of the French Catholics were under the age of 35 in 2009. At the same time, around 50 percent of the French Catholics were over the age of 50.<sup>137</sup> Nearly half of the Catholics in France have either already entered, or will soon be entering retirement. In 2014, only 56 percent of the French population identified itself as Catholic. While 24 percent of the Italian population and 13 percent of the Spanish population go to mass regularly, in France this number was around 4 percent in 2014. In 1972, by contrast, 82 percent of the French population identified as Catholic and around 20 percent went to mass regularly.<sup>138</sup>

According to a report of the National Council of Evangelicals in France (*Conseil national des évangéliques de France*), the conservative evangelical Protestants in France are growing today, and have been growing rapidly since the 1950s. In France there are around 500,000 regularly practicing evangelicals. They make up around one third of all Protestants in France. In terms of regular church participation, however, they make up the overwhelming majority of Protestants. Around 75 percent of Protestant Christians who regularly participate in church are evangelicals. Around 35 new evangelical Protestant churches are planted every year in France.<sup>139</sup> Of course, this is a very small cross-section of French society.

According to Gert Pickel, Professor for the Sociology of Religion and for the Sociology of the Church at the University of Leipzig, there are different levels of religiosity in the various European countries. In all these European countries, however, including Poland, there appears to be a complex

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<sup>133</sup> “Record numbers quit the Church of Sweden,” *Radio Sweden-Sveriges Radio*, 11 January, 2017, [www.sverigesradio.se](http://www.sverigesradio.se); The Swedish Church has come under criticism because of a recent study of 80 trips by church leaders, “Anger over lavish church expenses spending,” *Radio Sweden-Sveriges Radio*, 31 May, 2016, [www.sverigesradio.se](http://www.sverigesradio.se): “Several Swedish church parishes spend hundreds of thousands of kronor on overseas trips filled with entertainment, alcohol, and activities that are not work-related, Swedish Radio’s investigative team reports.”

<sup>134</sup> Samuel Osborne, “Norway’s biggest church loses more than 25,000 members after new online system makes it easier to leave,” *Independent*, September 2, 2016, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/norway-state-church-online-registration-system-deregister-members-leave-quit-a7221331.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/norway-state-church-online-registration-system-deregister-members-leave-quit-a7221331.html) “Norway’s state church has lost more than 25,000 members in a month after it launched an online registration system allowing people to sign up or opt out. [...] Within 24 hours of the site launching, 10,854 had deregistered. Within four days, a total of 15,053 had left. [...] An annual survey of Norwegians found the majority of Norwegians say they do not believe in God. Of the 4,000 Norwegians who were surveyed, 39 per cent said ‘no’ when asked whether they believed in God, 37 per cent said ‘yes’ and the remaining 23 per cent said they did not know.”

<sup>135</sup> McLeod, “Introduction,” 3. Cf. Alain Tallon and Catherine Vincent, ed., *Histoire du christianisme en France: Des Gaules à l’époque contemporaine* (Paris: Collin, 2014).

<sup>136</sup> Institut français d’opinion publique (IFOP)/ French Institute of Public Opinion (Director: Jérôme Fourquet), “Le catholicisme en France en 2009,” [ifop.fr](http://ifop.fr) (15 August, 2009), 13.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Yann Raison Du Cleuziou, *Qui sont les cathos aujourd’hui?* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2014).

<sup>139</sup> Daniel Liechti, *Les Églises protestantes évangélique en France: Situation 2017* (Paris: Conseil national des évangéliques de France, 2017), 12.

process of secularization taking place. This is the case even in traditional Catholic countries, like Luxemburg, Spain and Belgium. While there are “different levels” of religious participation in all these contexts, the “same developments” of secularization can be identified everywhere.<sup>140</sup>

## 5. Causes of the Decline

While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive explanation of the causes of the decline, it seems plausible that the decline of established Christianity in the Western world was related to at least ten broad issues (not listed in order of importance):<sup>141</sup>

1. The transition from the traditional obligatory framework of church membership to the new truly voluntary framework in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (as addressed above). Brown and Woodhead call this the “decline of paternalism.”

2. The emergence of the modern 20<sup>th</sup> century welfare state with its ideal of cradle-to-grave security may have contributed to the decline of the Christian religion. Christian churches historically offered ecclesial and community-based social support systems which have been in part replaced by the state institutions. This relationship can also be conceptualized differently. An alternative theory claims that the welfare state was encouraged by the decline of religion.<sup>142</sup>

3. The general trends of modern European socio-political and cultural transformation (Enlightenment, Romanticism, Industrial Revolution, *fin de siècle* modernity, with its sense of reserve towards religion, World War I, World War II, and radical socialisms) contributed to the decline by destabilizing traditional cultural, social, political, ecclesial and theological frameworks. This would include the demographic trends in the post-1960s Western world, including aging populations, lower birth rates and declining marriage rates. These issues are all macro-forces that deeply influenced virtually every aspect of cultural and social life in the Western world, including churches.

4. The identification of the religion with social hierarchical formalism from the pre-1960s cultural landscape, which fell out of favor in the 1960s. This is especially true for the European context. The hierarchical formalism should not be directly equated with conservative religious or moral positions.<sup>143</sup> Parallel to this phenomenon is the declining reputation of many older established

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<sup>140</sup> Gert Pickel, “Die Religionen Deutschlands, Polens und Europas im Vergleich. Ein empirischer Test religionssoziologischer Theorien,” in *Zwischen Säkularisierung und religiöser Vitalisierung: Religiosität in Deutschland und Polen im Vergleich*, ed. Michael Hainz et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2014), 95-108, here: 106. While Poland was reinvigorated with Catholicism after 1989 and there continues to be a conservative Catholic part of Polish society, the dominance of the religion may be changing with the coming generations. Christopher Garbowski remarks, “as the memory of John Paul II fades in Poland, some currents are certainly moving into or are awakening in the country that are hardly neutral towards religion. Anticlericalism is high on the list among these.” Christopher Garbowski, *Religious Life in Poland: History, Diversity and Modern Issues* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2014), 196. He also remarks: “The position of liberal Catholics is rather ambivalent. Their demands for reform within the Church have little chance of making headway in the foreseeable future.” 201.

<sup>141</sup> Most of these theses have been published in my “The decline of established Christianity in Germany.”

<sup>142</sup> For a critical discussion of the relationship between religion and the welfare state, see Philip Manow and Kees van Kersbergen, “Religion and the Welfare State – The Theoretical Context,” in idem, ed., *Religion, Class Coalitions, and Welfare States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-38; Peter Flora and Arnold J. Heidenheimer, ed., *The Development of Welfare States in Europe and America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1981).

<sup>143</sup> A series of studies, including Großbölting’s work, have addressed the transformative social and cultural shifts in the 1960s: Bernhard Dietz, Christopher Neumaier and Andreas Rödder, ed., *Gab es den Wertewandel? Neue Forschungen zum gesellschaftlich-kulturellen Wandel seit den 1960er Jahren* (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2013); Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, ed., *The Sixties and Beyond*; Hugh McLeod, “The Sixties: Writing the Religious History of a Crucial Decade,” in *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 14 (2001), 36-48; Klaus Fitschen, et al., ed., *Die Politisierung des Protestantismus: Entwicklungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland während der 1960er und 70er Jahre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Wilhelm Damberg, ed., *Soziale Strukturen und Semantiken des Religiösen im Wandel: Transformationen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949-1989* (Essen: Klartext-Verl., 2011); Hubert Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion: Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verl., 2009); Nicolai Hannig, *Die Religion der Öffentlichkeit: Kirche, Religion und Medien in der Bundesrepublik 1945-1980* (Göttingen:

churches among younger generations. Some of these churches are viewed by younger people as “old-fashioned” or “out of touch.” On the other hand, most liberal Protestant churches have usually tried to stay up to date with cultural and social trends.

5. The “supply-side” theory of the decline of Christianity in Europe may offer part of the explanation. As McLeod summarizes, members of this school of thought “attribute the problems faced by Christianity in Europe to the undue prominence of inflexible, monopolistic state churches, offering the consumer little choice.”<sup>144</sup>

6. The “self-secularization” of Christianity.<sup>145</sup> In one understanding of this theory, the self-secularization of the faith happened because of the desire to stay at the forefront of cultural, social and intellectual trends. Churches abandoned long-held traditional beliefs and practices in order to reduce the degree of difference between the churches and secularizing society at large. Ultimately, as advocates of this theory would hold, this leads to a loss of the particularity of the faith and finally to its irrelevance. This understanding of the decline of established Christianity is related to the theory of the decline which locates the cause of the decline in the adoption of modern liberalism. (This specific theory is discussed at length in “Interpretations of the Decline and Responses to it,” in the discussion of the interpretation of the decline as a consequence of modern liberalism, see below.) Many hold that the abandonment of specific long-held traditional doctrinal positions (that is, more precisely, the failure to teach them and defend them as credible) and the adoption of new paradigms of world-interpretation and new paradigms of the interpretation of human existence (which are not dependent upon the faith *per se*) have essentially made the Christian faith irrelevant.

The resulting status of irrelevance was not the desired consequence of those theologians who promoted the liberalization and modernization of the traditional faith. Indeed, this process of modernizing transformation did not explicitly reject the faith as such. It rather attempted to reinterpret the faith under the “conditions of modernity” (for example, with Rudolf Bultmann or Paul Tillich in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). This reinterpretation of the traditional faith already began in the Enlightenment with Friedrich Schleiermacher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant and others. The underlying presupposition of the reinterpretations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the belief that some form of the faith could continue to be taught and defended according to these reinterpretations. That is to say, the faith was supposed to continue to flourish after the liberalization and modernization. It was presumed that the faith could survive in a new form of expression even though specific features of the traditional religion had been abandoned (traditional teachings about God, Scripture as divine revelation, narratives of creation, Christology, eschatology,

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Wallstein-Verl., 2010); Frank Bösch, Review of Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel*, in: H-Soz-u-Kult (June 2013): [hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2013-2-229](http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2013-2-229). One of the chief contributors to the new informalism in Europe was post-World War Two American culture. In this sense, the decline of the old establishment churches could also be understood, in part, as a side-effect of the “Americanization” of Western Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. Alexander Stephan, ed., *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York, N.Y.: Berghahn Books, 2006); for some of the pre-history, see Egbert Klautke, *Unbegrenzte Möglichkeiten: “Amerikanisierung” in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1900-1933* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2003).

<sup>144</sup> McLeod, “Introduction,” 15. This paradigm is also called “religious economics.” It is addressed in careful detail by Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*, 19f. See also Eva M. Hamberg, “Christendom in Decline: The Swedish Case,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (see above), 47-62; Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994), 230-252; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>145</sup> Many have addressed this theory in other terms. One proponent of this theory who uses these terms explicitly is Wolfgang Huber. See Wolfgang Huber, “Auf dem Weg zu einer missionarischen Kirche. Ein Zwischenbericht,” in *Evangelische Theologie* 58 (1998), 461-479; idem, *Kirche in der Zeitenwende: Gesellschaftlicher Wandel und Erneuerung der Kirche* (Gütersloh: Verl. Bertelsmann Stiftung, 1998); Jens Beckmann, *Wohin steuert die Kirche?: Die evangelischen Landeskirchen zwischen Ekklesiologie und Ökonomie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 105-109. Cf. Christoph Theobald, “La ‘sécularisation interne’ du christianisme: quel apprentissage pour la théologie?” in *Recherches de science religieuse* 101 (2013), 201-210.

etc.). While these specific features of the traditional religion were reinterpreted – and thus continued to have a place in the modern faith in new forms – the traditional understandings of these features of the faith were no longer understood to be the essential foundation of the faith. The essential foundation was, according to the modernizing and liberalizing methods, the category of “religious experience of transcendence/ the Holy/ etc.,” or another category such as “liberation,” existential experience, “courage to be,” or even the religious experience of a newly interpreted idea of “revelation.” As the critics of this reinterpretation argue, this process of reinterpretation may not have intended to weaken the faith as a whole but it effectively supported the decline of the faith as that it made it practically unnecessary or irrelevant. According to the argument, this resulting irrelevance was caused by the fact that the fundamental coordinates of the reinterpretation did not, in the end, require the traditional faith. The reinterpretations relocated the foundation of the faith not in *particularities* of ecclesiastical doctrinal traditions (these being viewed as a problem from Lessing and Kant onwards), but in *universal categories*. The supposedly universal categories of “human consciousness,” “religious feelings/ affections,” “morality,” “experience,” “the absolute,” or the “ground of being,” for example, can be articulated without any necessary reference to the particularities of a first century Jewish preacher and the teachings of his followers.

7. The good economy and prosperity of the Western world may have also played a part in the marginalization of established Christianity. Through the production and distribution of material and immaterial goods, the good economy contributes significantly to the sense of fulfillment in life and thus to the meaning of life. Some of these needs may have been met by Christianity in previous generations.<sup>146</sup>

8. The decline of the traditional family model may have contributed to the decline of established Christianity. If the faith is primarily transferred to the coming generations through this basic social institution, then its decline may have contributed to the decline of the faith. The same theory could be reversed: The decline of the faith could have led to the decline of the traditional family model. A third option (which does not necessarily exclude the first two), is to claim that the decline of Christianity and the decline of the traditional family model ran parallel to one another and that both trends reinforced one another. New family models tend to be more individualistic with regard to raising children. Parents, for example, may no longer sign their children up for confirmation courses. Instead of this, the children themselves may be asked to make a decision if they want to participate or not.<sup>147</sup>

9. The process of ministerial professionalization may have encouraged the decline of established Christianity in some contexts. This theory suggests that the leaders of churches had a part to play in the decline. Established churches tend to have highly professionalized ministry training programs. The process of professionalization usually has the aim of making ministers fit into the educated middle class and in some cases fit with progressive cultural elites. These cross-sections of society are, however, very small. This is especially the case in liberal Protestant seminaries. In many cases, young theologians learn to think, talk, preach, plan and lead like managers of small companies or directors of visionary educational institutions. In some social contexts, this process of professionalization may have made the ministers (and thus the churches that they represent) more foreign to their own context. It is possible that the churches of established Christianity, which implemented these programs of professionalization in ministry training courses at their seminaries, were actually hindered in some contexts by these strategies of reform. There are many criticisms of these trends of ministry professionalization.<sup>148</sup> These criticisms usually approach this matter from a strictly normative theological perspective. Yet the same matter can be approached from a

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<sup>146</sup> Gerhard Wegner proposed this theory to me in an interview regarding the German situation (see below).

<sup>147</sup> This theory has been proposed by Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God*. On the claim that the family is the primary institution which transfers the faith from generation to generation, see Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, *Engagement und Indifferenz: Kirchenmitgliedschaft als soziale Praxis. V. EKD-Erhebung über Kirchenmitgliedschaft* (Hannover: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 2014), 28f.

<sup>148</sup> See for example John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002).

sociological perspective. It may be the case that through the process of professionalization ministers effectively burn the linguistic and intellectual bridge to the common people of the congregation and therefore isolate themselves and their churches from the surrounding culture. The remedy to this problem is, of course, not less education, it is better education – education that preserves this critical cultural, social and intellectual bridge to the normal people of the church congregation (who usually do not think and talk like CEOs).

10. Centralization and top-down authority structures within large regional churches. Theologies and church polities that reduce the levels of congregational control and responsibility may contribute to the decline. This encourages the laity to have a lower level of participation and identification with the ministry of the church and it encourages them to take a lower level of responsibility for the church. In the Protestant traditions, the background issue here is the degree of the realization of the priesthood of all believers. (This issue has been addressed in “Introduction to the Essays and to the Phenomenon of Established Christianity,” “Interpretations of the Decline and Responses to it” and “Christianity in the Western World after the Decline.”)

## 6. The Place of Religion in Secular Societies

The emergence of secular societies in the Western world raises the question about the public status of religion in these societies. In sociopolitical terms, the emergence of secular society does not necessarily mean that religion can no longer play a role in the public life of society. Jürgen Habermas, for example, argues that religion can continue to participate in secular societies. He calls for a communicative strategy whereby religious beliefs are made accessible to the public discourses. This can happen through a process of rational translation of beliefs into a language that can be understood by everyone. In this regard, the pluralistic democratic social order, which is based upon freedom and the rational common sense of the citizens, can engage religion productively. In Habermas’s ideal conception of public discourse, this “common sense” of civil society is something that is open to both scientific claims and religious claims. The broad common sense discourse of society seeks to be open to rational argument from all sides, including religion. The pluralized rationality of civil society is always ready to learn from both faith and reason. Faith itself offers an important meaning and interpretation of the world which should not be overlooked in civil society. It is an important voice among other voices within a pluralistic society.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, as recent studies have shown, religion continues to play an important role in the motivational background of many NGOs that do not officially identify themselves as religious.<sup>150</sup> With arguments like these, Habermas has contributed to the discussion about “post-secularism.” This is the rejection of the theory that religion (in general) is essentially in decline and will fall prey to secular rationalism and modern modes of world-interpretation.<sup>151</sup> With other philosophers, Habermas has attempted to move beyond radical interpretations of secularization that seek to exclude religion.

As is addressed in the essay below (“Christianity in the Western World after the Decline, Practical Suggestions and Outlook”), there are certainly some examples of continuing vitality of the Christian faith in the Western world. Especially conservative forms of the faith and new emergent churches and immigrant churches seem to be – at the moment – relatively stable in face of broader trends of secularization. These are, however, marginal phenomena in the broader evaluation of Christianity in the West. This becomes all the more clear when one compares these pockets of

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<sup>149</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt,” in *Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt. Eine Diskussion mit Jürgen Habermas*, ed. Michael Reder and Josef Schmidt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 26-36; Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen: Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001); idem, *Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 53/4 (2008), 33-46; idem, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009).

<sup>150</sup> See Allison Schnable, “What Religion Affords Grassroots NGOs: Frames, Networks, Modes of Action,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55/1 (2016), 1-17.

<sup>151</sup> See especially David Martin, *On secularization: Towards a revised general theory*; Mike King, *Postsecularism: The Hidden Challenge to Extremism* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2009); Massimo Rosati and Kristina Stoeckl, ed., *Multiple modernities and postsecular societies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

vitality to the massive exodus from the established churches that began in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Academic theories about the continuing importance of religion in public discourse are refreshing and encouraging as they seem to acknowledge the significance of religion. Such gestures of recognition by leading intellectual figures in the modern academy – which essentially endorses specific forms of religion as socially acceptable, respectable and dignified – will always be welcomed by theologians and church leaders. However, these gestures of recognition should not be misunderstood. These scholars are making pragmatic intellectual calculations based upon the factual continuing presence of religion in secular societies. The gestures of recognition are dependent upon the contemporary influence of religion in society, and the specific nature of this influence. As the evidence addressed above shows, established Christianity (in both the classic form of legal establishment and the modern form of cultural embeddedness) is not, in any sense, on firm ground in the Western world. Regarding the slow deterioration of the older form of legal establishment of the Church of England, William Whyte writes: “And as for the future, it seems likely that attempts will be made to drive the Church and State further apart. Nothing, however, is inevitable.”<sup>152</sup> The posture of recognition, which is closely associated with forms of continuing establishment, can change very quickly. The posture of recognition may change as established Christianity – which tends to be more liberal – continues its decline. Many of those non-established traditions of Christianity that are stable and growing today are not “ingratiated” with liberal modern attitudes, and many of them do not want to be. It is therefore probable that these growing traditions of conservative Christianity will not be granted the same gestures of recognition from the modern liberal academy that modern liberal forms of religion continue to enjoy in the post-secularism discourse.

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<sup>152</sup> William Whyte, “What future for Establishment?” in *The Established Church: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Mark Chapman, Judith Maltby and William Whyte (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 180-195, here: 195.