

The Religious Situation in the United States

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Even for those who visit the United States only occasionally and lack deep historical knowledge of the country, its religious pluralism and vitality are probably impossible to miss. While the German village often seems to be built around its only church, its American counterpart generally features a large number of churches, often lined up along a single street—a reflection of the great variety of religious faiths. In Europe on the other hand, despite all the changes wrought by industrialization and urban growth, flight and expulsion, the principle that there can be just one religion in one territory is still much in evidence geographically. American churches are often provided with large car parks, and these regularly fill up on Sundays, when services are held, but also throughout the day on weekdays, because a large number of activities are organized within the parishes and congregations.

After World War II, when settlement structures changed radically as increasing numbers of town dwellers moved into homes in the country, giving rise to the vast “suburbs,” it sometimes seemed that the new malls in the open countryside were taking the churches’ central place in social life. But before long, numerous new churches and synagogues were also constructed in these suburbs, and it is arguable that the average American suburban family continues to attend church more often than it goes to the mall (Butler 2004: 1375). In the cities, the—often enormous—historic church buildings remain, the congregations now often consisting entirely of African-Americans or new immigrants. In impoverished areas of large cities, plagued by violence and drugs, you will often come across mosques of an almost extravagant appearance; built with Middle Eastern money, these generally serve African-American converts rather than Muslim immigrants.

Any visitor to the country who turns on the television is likely to be astonished at the variety of religious programs, featuring fiery revivalist sermons and offers of advice and support around the clock; some will be struck by the fact

that even these programs, like many congregations, appear to be divided by race. Even the Catholic Church has now followed suit by establishing a TV channel. This, however, rather than preaching awakening, imparts knowledge of church history and theology in a way intelligible to the ordinary citizen, covering church services and papal journeys in visually attractive fashion.

Since Alexis de Tocqueville's famous journey through the United States in the 1830s and publication of his brilliant account of it, commentators have never ceased to make similar observations. The more secularized large parts of Europe became, the more exotic the religiosity of the United States seemed to European observers. Even from a distance, the religiously colored rhetoric of American political life is perceived as rather shocking by Europeans. Many overlook the fact that this rhetoric is found in all parts of the political spectrum. If the government's justification for war has religious undertones, we should not forget that the peace movement also asks God for forgiveness for the nation's arrogance. Slavery and racism were often justified in religious terms, but the resistance to it, up to and including the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, was also nourished by religious motives and its organizational structures drew on religious networks. There are of course regional variations and more strongly secularized milieus. In the northeastern United States and the Pacific Coast region, the country's religious vitality is certainly less visible, and the members of some intellectual milieus orient themselves towards secular models from Europe, in opposition to American traditions. Fundamentally, though, it is widely accepted that the United States is far more religious than practically any comparable European state.

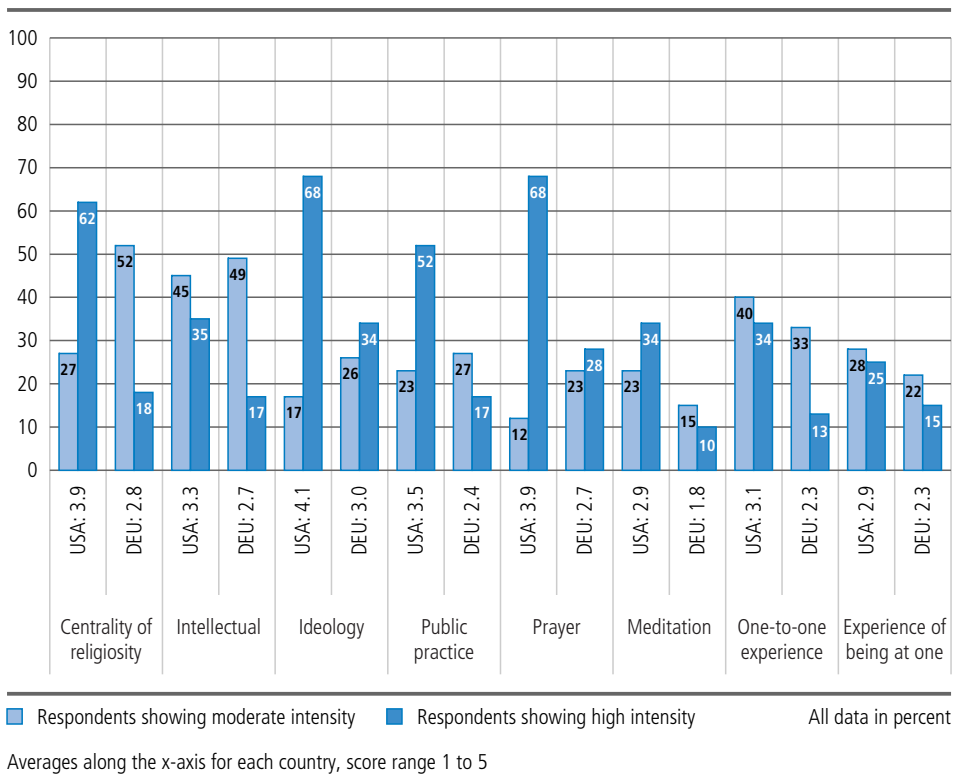
This finding, drawn from everyday experience, is confirmed by controlled social scientific research. It is clearly very difficult to record religiosity precisely and reliably in quantitative terms. This is easiest when we cite figures produced by social reality itself, by attempting to record, for example, the number of those attending Sunday church services or the number of members of churches and religious communities. It is far more difficult if we wish to ask people directly about their religious attitudes, because all the standardized questions, about belief in God or life after death for example, not only intrude on a highly intimate stratum of personhood, but also come up against the variety of forms of belief and a whole range of quasi-theological interpretive possibilities. All data in this field must therefore be treated with great caution. Opinion surveys and detailed sociological research do, however, regularly suggest a picture that confirms everyday observations.

The initial findings of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's ambitious Religion Monitor have entered the academic debate on solid footing. These findings are the

fruits of an extraordinarily differentiated survey instrument and measurement model that has integrated a wide variety of proposals and ideas. Stefan Huber’s incorporation of older American models is especially important here (Huber 2003). If we set aside two possible objections for the moment, to which we shall return later, then the most important result—in terms of the United States—is certainly the impressive confirmation of the enormously higher intensity of religiosity there in comparison to Germany and almost all other European countries.

Whereas some 18 percent of Germany’s population are classified as highly religious, 62 percent of the U.S. population falls into this category. Only 8 percent of U.S. citizens (in contrast to 28 % of Germans) are non-religious. In Germany, 17 percent attend religious services frequently and participate in other forms of public religious practice; in the United States, this is true of 52 percent of the population. While 28 percent of Germans pray frequently, 68 percent of

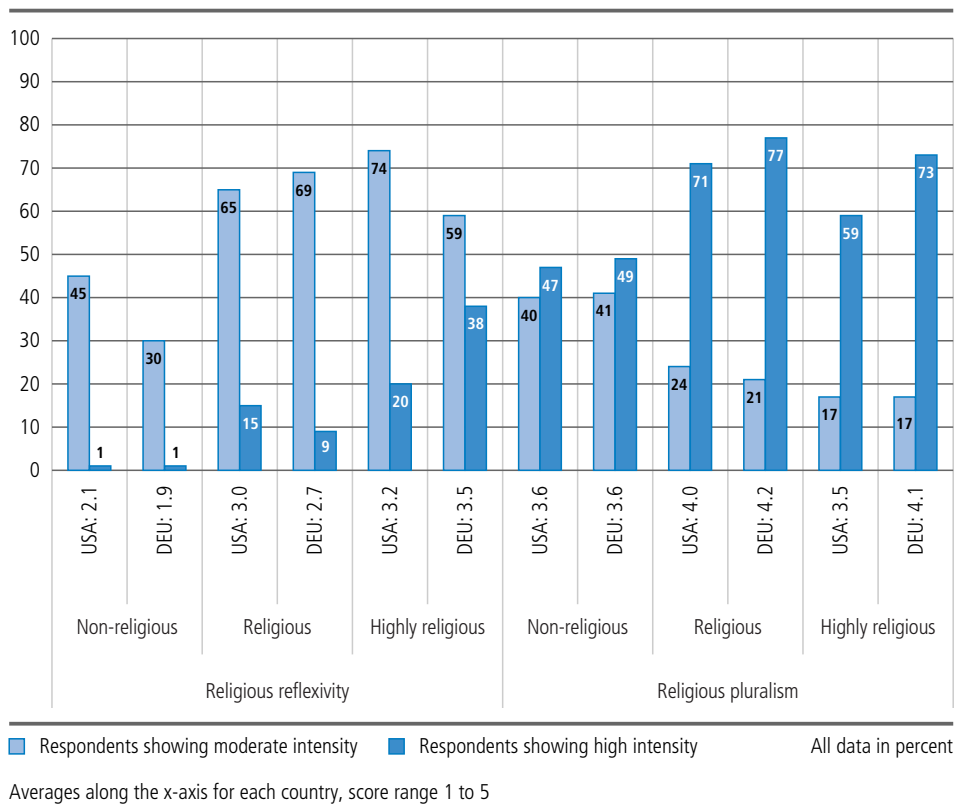
Figure 1: Centrality of religiosity and core dimensions of religiosity, comparison of Germany and the United States



U.S. Americans do so. The frequency of meditation also differs widely (10 % in Germany and 34 % in the United States). A similar picture emerges regarding the different varieties of religious experience surveyed. The same difference is no longer surprising when it is located in theistic paradigms of spirituality, but it is not entirely clear that this is also the case with pantheistic paradigms of spirituality.

The only findings that were very close for both countries involved questions regarding “religious reflexivity” and “religious pluralism” (Figure 2). This includes the willingness to reflect on one’s own religious beliefs, as well as an openness to other religious traditions. The results for believers are especially interesting; it is certainly easier for non-believers to accept that there may be a “core truth” for every religion. It is also worth mentioning that there is little to support the idea that Americans’ religiosity is less reflexive than Germans’ reli-

Figure 2: Religious reflexivity and religious pluralism plotted against the centrality of religiosity, Germany compared to the United States



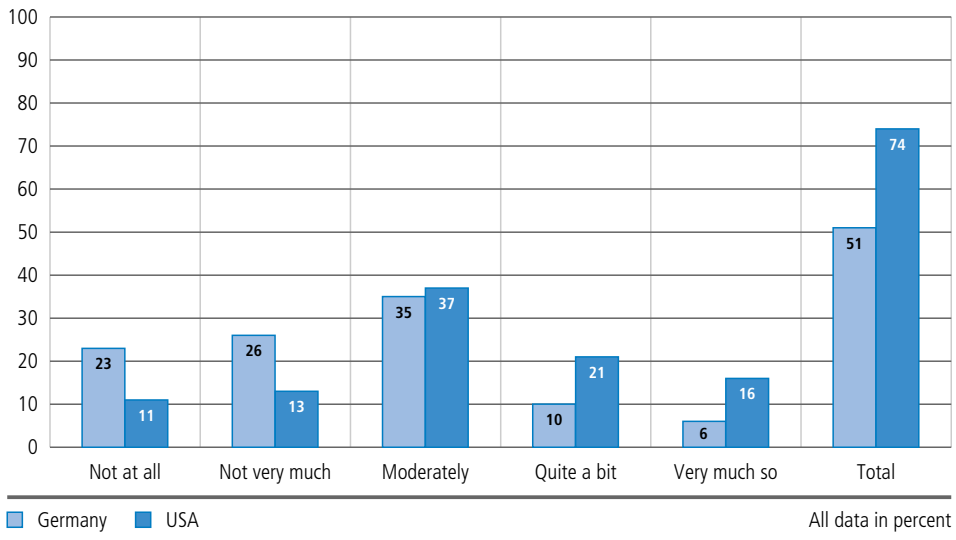
giosity. More specific questioning shows that there are confessional differences within and between the countries, but there is no clear divergence in a fundamental sense.

There are methodological concerns to be raised in light of such results. One reservation could be that the entire investigation was based upon an understanding of religion that makes the belief in “transcendence” a cornerstone of the definition of religion (cf. Pollack 2003). The centrality of transcendence, is, however, in no way self-evident. Indeed, ever since Karl Jasper’s 1949 book, “On the Origin and Goal of History,” the continuing debate over the emergence of the idea of transcendence in the so-called Axial Age of the last pre-Christian millennium has demonstrated that there is a long history of religion without concepts of transcendence in the strictest sense of the term (for more on the state of the debate, see Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock 2005). Because current religious trends also include “de-transcendentalization,” or a return to the pre-Axial forms, this discussion has relevance beyond the history of religion. In fact, without this distinction, it is difficult to grasp contemporary forms of belief at the margins of established religions. Such practices/beliefs surface here within the set of questions aimed at capturing self-descriptions of “spiritual,” and are insofar not completely disregarded. Their particular structures, however, remain hidden.

A second concern can be raised regarding the limits of what representative surveys of individuals can yield. The number of those attending church, for example, seems to be systematically overestimated if we rely on what respondents say rather than counting the number of churchgoers. Respondents in the United States are generally quick to assume that one *wants* them to profess their faith in a religion—just as, conversely, Europeans tend to be ashamed to openly profess their faith. But even this “social desirability bias,” which probably tends to exaggerate the quantitative differences between the United States and Europe, helps confirm the present chapter’s point of departure. The United States is a modern society characterized by a high degree of religious vitality.

The first part of this brief overview of the religious situation in the United States asks how we are to explain this. This is an attempt to shed light on historically persistent peculiarities of the United States with respect to religion. The second part then attempts to characterize the present. The results of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s representative survey constitute the key set of data and source of information for what follows, as do the latest results of the Pew Forum (2008).

Figure 3: Self-assessment of religiosity, Germany compared to the United States



The American way: “The first freedom”

Precisely because of its religious character, the United States was long considered a special case in need of explanation. Those who assumed that processes of modernization—however defined in detail—inevitably lead to secularization (in the sense of the decreasing importance of religion) were confronted with a puzzle. European countries such as Poland and Ireland, to which this rule also appeared not to apply, could be described simply as insufficiently modernized; they were still to undergo genuine modernization, and in that framework secularization would eventually occur. But the United States? Who seriously wished to dispute that we are dealing here with an economically and technologically modern society, indeed, perhaps the most modern of all?

Two explanatory models suggested themselves to all those who thought in this way, their thinking based on the unconscious assumption that European history since the 18th century foregrounded the ultimate fate of the entire world—in the event, that is, of successful development. One model, which seemed to have proved its worth with reference to the European exceptions, could also be applied to the United States. If the Poles and the Irish remained exceptionally religious because the only way for them to defend their national identity and independence was through their Catholicism, then the religious

vitality of the United States might also be down to the fact that its national identity had been religiously imbued from the outset. The explanation they had been looking for was thus the legacy of Puritanism.

It is in fact entirely correct that the United States has a pronounced national mythology in which the early Puritan emigrants play a major role (cf. overview of the extensive literature provided by Hochgeschwinder 2004), but which is also moulded in its innermost structures by the application to America of Old Testament notions of the covenant with God and of the chosen people; this was used to justify expansion and mission. But the terms “Puritanism” or even “Protestantism” are far too imprecise to truly do justice to the religious currents in the United States over the last few centuries. Another objection to this supposed explanation is, however, far more compelling.

Precise quantitative studies of the United States have shown that there was an almost continuous and substantial increase, at least in the number of members of religious communities, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries (Finke and Stark 1992). Commentators have spoken here of “the churching of America.” Again, we must bear in mind that membership is no sure indicator of faith. But given that other indicators point in the same direction, there are compelling empirical reasons to reject the interpretation of US particularism as a kind of delayed secularization, as implied in the notion of the Puritan legacy. It is not that the same process has played itself out as in Europe, just more slowly or at a later point. What we are seeing here is a different process with a different trajectory.

Rather than a “legacy,” the second obvious—but also ultimately untenable—explanation privileges something that immigrants have supposedly “brought along with them.” It might be assumed that the United States remained so religious or even became more religious because it absorbed a ceaseless flow of new immigrants, whose religiosity, inculcated in them in their home countries, acted as a guide for them and their children even after emigration. On this view, in brief, the Poles and Irish were responsible not only for the exceptions in Europe, but also for the exception of the United States. A rich array of research also exists on this question (cf. Herberg 1960 and Smith 1978). To summarize its findings: we can by no means self-evidently assume greater religiosity *prior to* emigration. Often, emigrants from the same countries who went to countries other than the United States were by no means conspicuously religious. In fact, it seems that—to put it very cautiously—something in the circumstances of the United States attracted and continues to attract immigrants to religious communities, creating bonds and influencing them religiously.

Against both these apparent but untenable explanations, another view has taken hold within the sociology of religion over the last few decades. Although many of its details are also contested (cf. Warner 1993; Chaves and Gorski 2001), there is broad consensus on many points. This is the idea that the decisive particularity of the United States vis-à-vis Europe is that since the 18th century the former has known no state-backed territorial religious monopoly of the kind characteristic of Europe since the end of the post-reformatory wars and civil wars. Both elements of the formula are important here. The absence of a monopoly facilitates pluralism; the absence of state support allows free competition between plural religious forces.

By stipulating “free exercise” and “no establishment,” the American constitution guarantees comprehensive freedom of religion on the one hand and the separation of state and church(es) on the other. At the level of the individual states, as late as the 18th century there were attempts to form territorial religious monopolies, but these failed to endure or truly take hold because of federal regulations. This separation of state and religious communities must, however, be understood quite differently than in the case of France, where the state sees itself as “laicist” or secularist and takes a skeptical view of all religions. In the United States, meanwhile, the prevailing historical tradition is an encouraging relationship with religion on the part of the state. This does not mean that this is the only tradition; intense political and legal controversies about the exact nature of the separation of state and church have also arisen frequently in the United States, particularly during the present era.

This rich pluralism of religious communities is thus not only extant (cf. overview by Williams 1998), but politically desired and culturally legitimized. I propose that we distinguish between *plurality* as a mere empirical fact and a *pluralism* endorsed by certain values. Hence, all explanations of the religious vitality of the United States which, influenced by the conceptual models of supply-side economics, take account only of the plurality of the supply itself or even the market-like nature of religious competition, fall short.

The crucial rupture pointing towards America’s specific historical path in fact precedes the constitution by more than one hundred years (Joas 2004). It occurred in the 1630s, when the Puritan preacher Roger Williams, in protest at the religious tyranny of emigrant Puritans in Massachusetts, left the colony and established a new one in Rhode Island that guaranteed religious freedom for *all* Christians, but also for “Jews, heathens and Turks,” in other words Jews, native Americans and Muslims. A notion of religious freedom arising not from indifference or skepticism towards religion, but which was itself deeply motivated by

religion—the idea being that the individual must be free to develop his relationship with God—thus became the “first freedom.” For all the differences that characterized the position of religion in the American Revolution, this has rightly been seen as the nucleus of the American constitutional organization of religious life and of human rights in general.

None of this should be taken as a naive idealization of American political and religious life. A history of conflict, racism and extreme social inequality, violence and ethnic tension has hardly seen the exclusive application of noble principles. But it is on this level that we will find the explanation for the enduring religious vitality of the United States. In America, there has always been a tendency for those who cannot identify politically or theologically with their religious community to move *within* the religious sphere rather than leave it. This applies above all to Protestant Christians. Catholics traditionally tend to move closer to or farther away from the church which is usually the only one in question for them. There certainly are Catholics—currently among Latin American immigrants in particular—who give up their religion by switching to Pentecostalist churches, but again, they tend to remain within the ever-changing plural religious spectrum. The Catholic Church has responded to this shift by increasing the incorporation of charismatic and ethnic components.

Some features of the religious situation in the United States

Having briefly reviewed the key religious characteristics of the United States, our task now is to diagnose the contemporary situation. To gain initial purchase on this vast and confusing field, I draw on a set of concepts proposed by the Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1912) in the years leading up to World War I and in his constant dialogue with Max Weber. He distinguishes between three main organizational forms of Christianity; we must leave to one side for the moment the question of whether this concept is at all applicable to non-Christian religions.

The first type is referred to as “church”; this means institutions administering treasures of salvation and grace, which aim to attract a mass membership and which are generally able to adapt to reality, “because, to a certain extent, they can afford to ignore the need for subjective holiness for the sake of the objective treasures of grace and of redemption” (ibid.: 14). In much the same way as Max Weber, Troeltsch contrasts the “church” with the “sect,” by which he means organizations structured as free associations of believers, which thus generally have fewer members and which emphasize strict compliance with precepts

rather than God's grace. In contrast to Weber, Troeltsch also identified a third type, which he calls "mysticism"; here, "the world of ideas which had hardened into formal worship and doctrine is transformed into a purely personal and inward experience" (ibid.: 967). He is aware that this form of religiosity allows for "the formation of groups on a purely personal basis, with no permanent form." Some have therefore rejected the idea that we can speak of a type of social organization here in the first place. Others, meanwhile, see this as a particular strength of Troeltsch's conceptual apparatus with respect to the analysis of religion under conditions of individualization—according to Daiber (2002), who points out that the concepts developed by Troeltsch and Weber were already influenced by the motif of a relativization of Europe in light of the experience of the United States as well as the books of William James—and this is the view espoused by the present author.

An account of contemporary American realities in light of this typology turns up a number of important characteristics:

1. While the type "church" is characteristic of Europe, this does not apply to the United States. We can therefore categorize the United States as the only North Atlantic society characterized by the type "sect" (Seymour Martin Lipset). It is only logical that the term loses its negative connotation as a result. In describing the United States, rather than referring to churches on the one hand and sects on the other, all religious communities are typically treated equally in terms of how they are designated. Reference is made to "denominations," that is, religious communities based on voluntary membership of equal legal status. However embedded it may be in global structures, even that religious community which prototypically embodies the type "church" across the world—the Catholic Church—must present itself as a "denomination" within the United States.

2. For a long time, there were weighty theological differences between the individual Protestant denominations and a virtually insurmountable distance between Protestantism as a whole and Catholicism, which was considered alien, indeed un-American, on account of its international character and many cultural characteristics of Catholic immigrants, with respect, for example, to their laid-back relationship to alcoholic beverages. Among the most important developments in the period after World War II was the decreasing significance of theological differences, particularly within American Protestantism (Wuthnow 1988: 71 ff.). The United States has never been a country characterized by a broad dissemination of religious knowledge or a culture of popular theological debate. But over the last few decades, theological differences have been overlaid by other differences to such an extent that this too has made it easier to switch allegiance

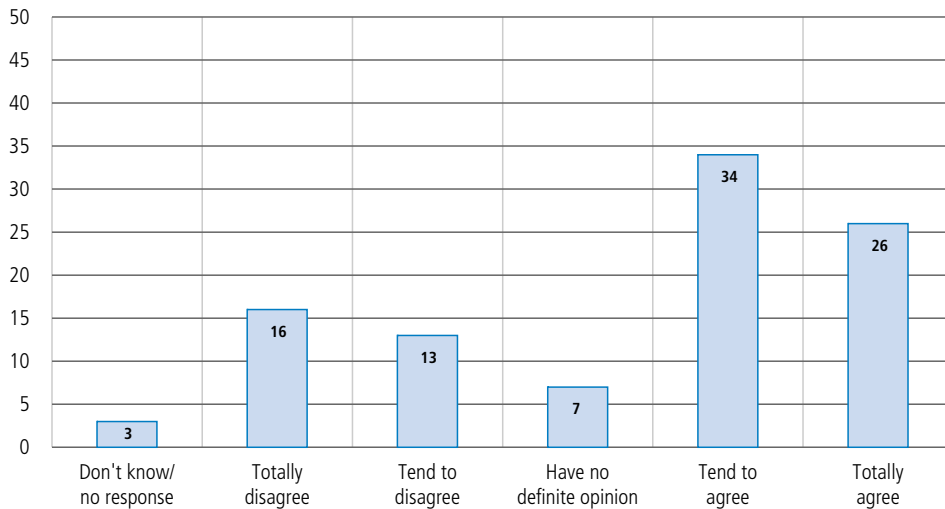
within the Protestant spectrum. However, the flip side of this increasing indifference towards theological issues is that, as a result, other issues—of a political or cultural nature, for example—are becoming key to membership and are exercising a homogenizing effect on the individual denominations.

3. Because the state neither allies with a particular church nor derives its self-image from its emancipation from one, it is unable to obtain its legitimacy from a church or from its opposition to a church. As a consequence, forms of “civil religion” have developed in the United States, classically expressed in the inaugural addresses given by presidents on assuming office as well as in speeches on national holidays (cf. Bellah 1986). This civil religion cannot be identifiable with any specific religious community, but must offer points of contact to many. In contrast to the attempts which have been made to describe this civil religion as a fixed structure, I would assert that it is more of a “discursive space” than a “structure,” that is, a spectrum of possibility for the justification of political opinions, including contrary ones. Since President Woodrow Wilson’s initiative for a League of Nations, the development of international institutions for the peaceful settlement of conflicts has been anchored within this horizon, just as was President George W. Bush’s brazen declaration of the irrelevance of such institutions in the run-up to the Iraq War of 2003.

But this civil religion not only provides a space for the delivery of political rhetoric; an inter-religious dialogue on values is also developing within it. There can be no disputing the fact that the civil religion of the United States was originally largely Protestant in character. Through a wide variety of efforts to come to terms with Catholicism, extending far into the 20th century, this civil religion was repositioned on a generally Christian foundation. In the 20th century, particularly as a result of the struggle against Nazi Germany and the experience of the Holocaust, this foundation was expanded, taking on a Judeo-Christian character. At present, however politically charged the debate on Islam may be, there are good reasons to be optimistic that this foundation is becoming even broader, incorporating this religious tradition as well, which would allow us to refer to an “Abrahamic” civil religion. The immigration of Hindus and Buddhists and the intensive reception of Buddhism among the American educated classes show the direction in which this process of value generalization will have to go in future.

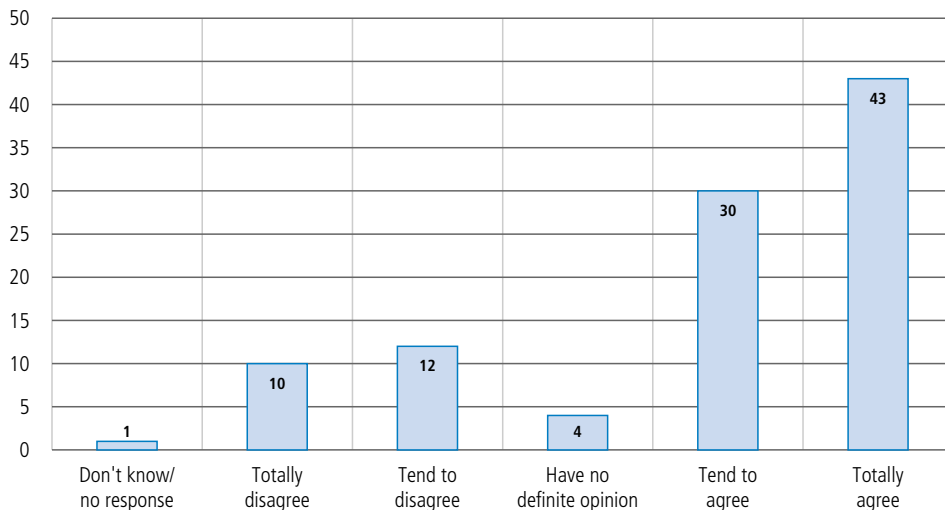
More so than in any other country, such a process is likely to occur in the United States, with its diverse religious landscape and wide variety of denominations. As the Religion Monitor shows, openness and tolerance toward other religions is particularly pronounced here. For 60 percent of those surveyed, every religion has a core of truth, and 73 percent believe one should be open to all reli-

Figure 4: "For me every religion has a core of truth."—United States



All data in percent

Figure 5: "I believe that one should have an open mind to all religions."—United States



All data in percent

gions. The conventional notion that intensely religious people tend to be intolerant does not ring true for the United States (cf. Pew Forum 2008).

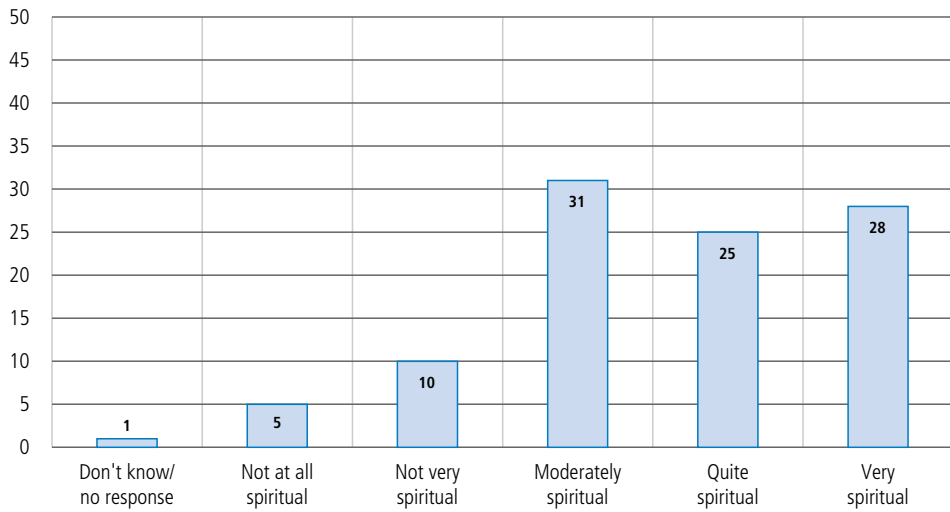
4. A particularly attractive feature of Troeltsch's conception is its inherent potential to take trends towards the individualization of religiosity seriously. These are incontrovertible, especially in the United States. For many people, the significance of fixed religious truths, which are also anchored institutionally within a religious community, has undoubtedly diminished in favor of the aspiration to be guided by one's own "spiritual" experience in matters of faith and to measure all doctrinal and institutional claims in this light. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's representative survey shows 84 percent of the population describing themselves as spiritual and "only" 74 percent describing themselves as religious. Moreover, 32 percent of those surveyed in the United States report that they rely on several different religious traditions. Among the highly religious, however, 62 percent remain true to their faith and do not draw upon teachings from other religions.

But an approach which is to some extent democratic and anti-authoritarian in character, can have a number of different consequences. It would be very one-sided to assume that the only possibility here is a purely narcissistic-egocentric attitude which simply links together all one's own proclivities in eclectic fashion, ennobling them with the title of unique spirituality: "I'm religious but in my own personal way. I always say that I have a Cindy Crawford religion—it's my own"—as supermodel Cindy Crawford is supposed to have said (Yamane 1997: 116). A plethora of critical terms have been coined to capture this kind of pseudo-religiosity: religion à la carte, patchwork religiosity, kaleidoscopic or "pick and choose" religion (Dobbelaere 2002: 176).

Exponents of secularization theory see in this phenomenon confirmation of their expectation that the inevitable modern loss of faith is merely hiding behind a false characterization as religion. Other commentators counter this by arguing that there are quite different, far more serious forms of spiritual search and that many of these are in fact taking place within the major religious communities or on their margins.

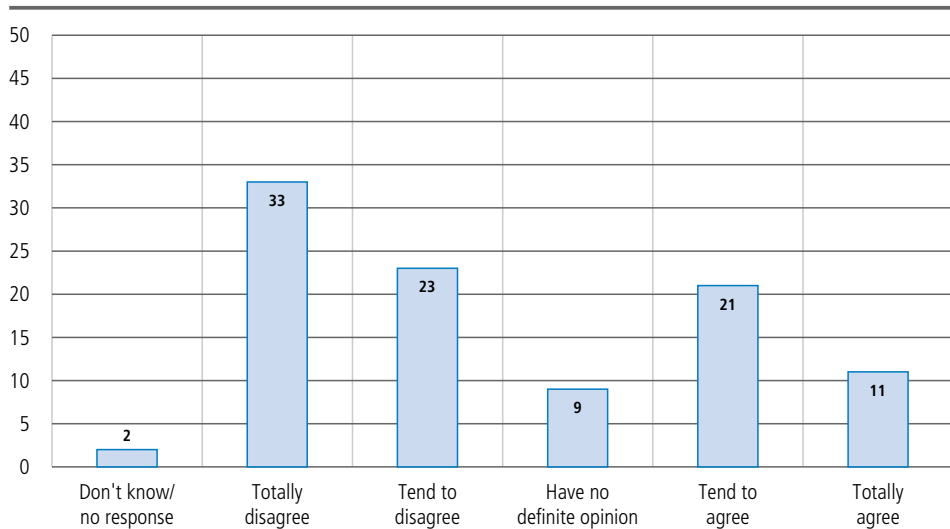
A spiritual search may result from experiences that inspire a desire for theological interpretation and institutional tradition; but conversely, it may also arise from the need to bring about the spiritual revitalization of the teachings of one's own religious community and of the life of this community. It would also be quite wrong to equate this individualization with the complete privatization of religion. Particularly in the United States, faith is not withdrawn into individuals' inner life, but remains the motif and object of a wide variety of forms of social life. It thus seems appropriate to classify self-organized bible study groups,

Figure 6: Self-assessment of spirituality in the United States



All data in percent

Figure 7: "For myself I rely on teachings from several different religious traditions."—United States



All data in percent

for example, or self-help groups in which anyone can participate whatever their religious affiliation, as the expression of a lively and sustained “societal conversation about transcendent meaning” within the United States rather than as evidence of secularisation (Besecke 2005).

5. The religious pluralism in the United States has market-like characteristics to some extent. This is not, as is often assumed, self-evident. Religious communities may co-exist without individuals perceiving them as offering them a range of options. But the fluid boundaries between the Protestant denominations and the waves of revivalist movements throughout American history have encouraged entrepreneurial behavior with the aim of assimilating and mobilizing believers. Such behavior is based on the willingness to deploy the latest technologies and media to further one’s aims and to keep organizational structures flexible rather than keeping them in line with theological dogma.

A salient feature of the situation in the United States is the frequency with which one changes his or her religious affiliation within a lifetime. According to the Pew Forum, currently 28 percent of those surveyed have switched faiths and as much as 44 percent have done so when one considers switching among Protestant denominations. As far as immigrants are concerned, attempts to attract new members have tended to result in active efforts on their behalf whenever their interests seemed compatible with a given religious community. In a market like this, it is fairly easy to found a new church. It is thus no coincidence that so many of the new religions (such as the Mormons) that have managed to spread throughout the world emerged in the United States in the 19th and 20th century.

Just as bureaucratization represents an ever-present threat to the type “church,” so does an excessive market orientation threaten the denominations within a market. So-called “church shopping”—that is, a consumeristic choice among the range of possible religious communities available, for example when a person relocates, seems unproblematic because in the main this occurs only within the sphere of the Protestant denominations, whose theological differences, as already noted, have lost much of their significance. More striking of course is the tendency, particularly in the so-called megachurches, to go to such lengths to attract all kinds of potential “customers” that what they are offered is convenience, variety and theological vagueness.

Here, it stands to reason to link religious phenomena with mass culture and consumer culture in general (Moore 1994). At times, religion is even extolled as a means to an end—as a way of achieving preconceived, thoroughly worldly goals. If faith is understood in such instrumental fashion, as a kind of “positive thinking” that helps you to be strong, successful or rich (or “Slim for Him!”), it

loses the very spur to transcendence which religion has had since the Axial Age, that is, since notions of transcendence emerged. Rather than decentring the individual, leading her away from herself, she is seduced by a kind of autosuggestive, neomagical practice. Like Alan Wolfe (2003), we may then refer to the danger that even politically conservative forms of religion in the United States may be lived in a culturally narcissistic way.

Two potential scenarios for the future

These remarks were intended to bring out some of the key characteristics of the contemporary religious situation in the United States. This could only be done in a selective way; many aspects of this hugely heterogeneous country had to be left out of account. To conclude, however, I would like to contemplate future developments, presenting two possible scenarios, which perhaps mark the extreme ends of a spectrum. The reality is likely to lie somewhere in between.

A pessimistic scenario, which seemed plausible to many in the first years of the presidency of George W. Bush, predicted a profound cultural split within the United States as a result of the triumph of Protestant fundamentalism within the political sphere. On this view, such a triumph would inevitably bring together all those unable to feel at home in an exclusively “Christian” nation in this narrow sense. Within the framework of this resistance, a quasi-European secularism might spread and attain hegemony for the first time. As a result, cultural conflicts of a religious hue would be aggravated over the long term. The intellectual offensive of a “new atheism” could speak for this scenario.

However, there have always been serious objections to this prognosis. Critics claim that the enormous polarization of the political camps that has occurred since the election of George W. Bush reflects political strategies and mechanisms rather than the actual attitudes of the American people, who can by no means be divided sharply into two clear-cut milieus. On this view, the political influence of Protestant fundamentalism is also vastly overestimated. While religiously motivated voters are taken into account in election campaigns—and justifiably so, as the Religion Monitor shows 65 percent of U.S. citizens stating that their religiosity influences their political opinions—political decisions themselves are made on a very different basis.

Even within the generally conservative Protestantism in the United States, these commentators argue, there is a great deal of political diversity. This camp is in fact far from uniform and rigid. In many areas (such as environmental pro-

tection), Christian motifs (concerning the preservation of Creation) are increasingly opposed to the political tendencies of the Republican Party. The Congressional elections of autumn 2006 seem to suggest that the critics of the pessimistic prognosis are right.

The optimistic scenario assumes that American Christianity in all its diversity will see the fulfilment of the very thing that Ernst Troeltsch dreamed of: a creative synthesis of the three organizational principles of church, sect and mysticism—or perhaps we should say, a plethora of creative syntheses. Advocates of the optimistic scenario hope that the peaceful coexistence of all religious communities within a democratic culture will set an example for the entire world. And, in fact, all the major religions of the world have a substantial presence in the United States. Given that, as a result of modern communications technology and transportation, immigrants generally no longer lose contact with their countries of origin, it is possible that this will have repercussions on the religious life in those countries (I have José Casanova to thank for this idea). The religious life of the United States, in all its variety, thus influences the religious life of the entire globe. Processes of this kind would have a salutary effect, disrupting the ties binding a particular religion to a particular milieu again and again. Reality would begin to correspond with the state of affairs expressed so well in the motto of a Catholic parish in Chicago (mine, St. Thomas the Apostle): “God’s people in extraordinary variety.”

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