Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700
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In recent years, the sociology of religion has been consumed by a debate over secularization that pits advocates of a new, rational-choice paradigm (the so-called religious economies model) against defenders of classical secularization theory. According to the old paradigm, the Western world has become increasingly secular since the Middle Ages; according to the new paradigm, it has become increasingly religious. I put these two images of religious development to the test through a detailed examination of religious life in Western Europe before and after the Reformation. I conclude that the changes in social structure and religious experience that occurred during this period were considerably more complex than either the old or new paradigms suggest and, indeed, that the two paradigms are neither so opposed nor so irreconcilable as many of their defenders contend. It is possible, indeed probable, that Western society has become more secular without becoming less religious. I discuss the limitations of the two competing paradigms and sketch the outlines of a more adequate theory of religious change.

"With what serenity each left the wondrous gatherings in those churches full of mystery, bejeweled with images inciting, filled with sweetest scents, enlivened by music sacred and uplifting!"
—Novalis, German Romantic

"If a man will take a view of all popery, he shall easily see that a great part of it is mere magic."
—William Perkins, Puritan Divine

"That's the kind of love preachers say we ought to have for Our Lord, because He is who He is, without expecting any glory or worrying about any punishment. Me, I'd rather love Him and serve Him because He can do what He can do."
—Sancho Panza, Spanish Peasant

The "secularization debate," which has been raging for the better part of a decade, pits advocates of a new, rational-choice "paradigm"—the so-called religious economies model—against defenders of classical and "neoclassical" secularization theory. Supporters of the new paradigm propose "dropping the term secularization from all theoretical discourse. . . . [W]hat is needed," they argue, "is not a theory of the decline or decay of religion, but of religious change" (Stark and Iannaccone 1994:231, emphasis in the original). Meanwhile, revisionist de-
fenders of the “old paradigm” argue that the concept of secularization remains as relevant as ever. In their view, secularization theory is a theory of religious change (Chaves 1994; Lechner 1991; Yamane 1997). I put these two theories to the test by exploring how well each describes and explains the religious development of Western Europe during the medieval and early-modern periods. My conclusion: Both theories are empirically inadequate and in need of fundamental revision.

Until now, debate between the two “paradigms” has focused mainly on the modern era (i.e., 1780 to the present). Advocates of the new paradigm point to historically rising rates of “religious participation” (e.g., church membership and church attendance) in the United States and relatively stable rates of subjective religious belief in Western Europe as evidence that religion is not declining (Finke and Stark 1988; Greeley 1989; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Warner 1993). Defenders of the old paradigm point to historically declining rates of religious participation in Western Europe and the growth of various non-Christian beliefs (e.g., in astrology, magic, and reincarnation) as evidence that religious institutions and worldviews are losing their influence (Bruce 1996; Dobbelare 1993; Wallis and Bruce 1991). Thus, although supporters of the two paradigms seem to agree about the facts, they clearly disagree about how to interpret them.

One way of resolving this dispute—or at least clarifying it—is to historicize it. After all, both “paradigms” claim to be theories not simply of modern religion but of religious change tout court. Both, accordingly, rest on certain basic assumptions about the religious history of the West. Thus, some advocates of the new paradigm have argued that the Middle Ages were a time, not of universal faith, but of popular superstition, thereby suggesting that the West has actually become more Christian over time, rather than less Christian as is often supposed (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). They posit historically increasing levels of religiosity—an ascending path of religious development. By contrast, defenders of the old paradigm usually contend that the fragmentation of the Western Church, which followed the Reformation, seriously diminished the authority and centrality of religious elites and institutions. They posit historically decreasing levels of religiosity—a descending path of religious development. The two paradigms thus rest on seemingly opposite assumptions about, and images of, the Western religious trajectory.

These interpretations may have appeared tenable in the early 1970s, at the close of the first “secularization debate,” but they are much less plausible today. Recent historical research strongly suggests that the Middle Ages were neither a period of universal faith nor a period of popular superstition, but rather a period of universal superstition, an age, that is, in which faith and magic were not so much opposed as intermingled. What has happened since the Middle Ages, the literature suggests, is not really a “Christianization” of individual believers so much as a “rationalization” and individualization of the Christian faith. The ascending image of Western religious development advanced by the “supply-siders” is thus deeply misleading and anachronistic. But the “descending” interpretation advanced by the “secularizers” is equally problematic. Most Reformation historians now argue that the fragmentation of the Western Church actually stimulated a tighter relationship between church and state and profoundly increased the authority of religious elites and institutions in all areas of social and political life. In a certain sense, then, the early-modern period was actually less “secularized” than the Middle Ages were. The historical evidence therefore suggests that both the new and the old “paradigms” are empirically inadequate in certain basic respects and that their conceptual frameworks are in need of reconstruction. It also suggests that the two paradigms may not be as incompatible as their defenders maintain.

THE TWO PARADIGMS: POSITIONS AND DEBATES

The “Old” Paradigm: Social Differentiation or Religious Decline?

Proponents of the new paradigm often claim that secularization theory, the “old” paradigm, is a theory of religious decline. This is not entirely correct.

First of all, there is not one “secularization theory” but many. Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Berger, Luckmann, Parsons, Wilson, Bruce,
Casanova, and many others could all be meaningfully described as “secularization theorists” (as, indeed, could any theorist who deals with the dynamics of social differentiation). Their theories of secularization are hardly identical, and only a few of them posit a historical trend toward religious decline.

What the various theories have in common is what might be called the differentiation thesis: They all argue that religious and non-religious institutions have become increasingly differentiated over time, at least in the modern West. Saint-Simon was perhaps the first to clearly articulate the differentiation thesis. In his view, the relationship between the “spiritual and temporal powers” went through three historical stages. In the “Classical Civilizations” of Rome and Greece, church and state were both ruled by the patrician class and thus were deeply intertwined. In “Medieval Civilization,” church and state became distinct, with the former being formally predominant. And in “Modern Civilization,” the relationship is reversed, with the state attaining factual predominance over the church (Saint-Simon 1975:43-45). Although there are minor differences in emphasis and detail, most other theories of secularization tell an essentially similar story: The original unity between church and state in classical societies gives rise to a loose symbiosis during the Middle Ages and then to separation and subjugation of the church (Saint-Simon 1975:43-45). Although there are minor differences in emphasis and detail, most other theories of secularization tell an essentially similar story: The original unity between church and state in classical societies gives rise to a loose symbiosis during the Middle Ages and then to separation and subjugation of the church (Saint-Simon 1975:43-45).1

Where these theorists differ is in how they conceive the effects of social differentiation on the relationship between the religious and nonreligious spheres and on the intensity and character of individual religiosity. They take four basic positions: disappearance, decline, privatization, and transformation. The most fervid defender of the disappearance thesis is undoubtedly Comte. In his view, religion is destined to be supplanted by science. Indeed, Comte (1974) went so far as to assert that “dogmatic faith no longer exists, all the beliefs which lay at its root being extinct or nearly so” (p. 90), and that “the doctrines of religion influence men’s minds only so far as morality is still associated with them” (p. 99; also see Gauchet 1997; Saint-Simon 1975). Comte thus believes that the religious sphere and individual religiosity will be supplanted by science.

The most consistent advocate of the decline thesis is Weber. Like Comte, he believed that scientific rationalism tended to undermine the cognitive basis of religious worldviews. Unlike Comte, however, he did not assume that this would lead to a complete triumph of the scientific worldview or to the disappearance of traditional religion. Some people “cannot bear the fate of the times,” and for them, says Weber (1946), “the arms of the church are opened widely and compassionately . . .” (p. 155; also see Bruce 1996). Moreover, there is always the possibility that “new prophets” and “new gods” will arise, though Weber suggests that they are more likely to be political than religious.

The most forceful spokesman for the privatization thesis is undoubtedly Luckmann. Like Weber, Luckmann (1963) believes that the influence of the old, institutionalized religions is steadily declining. But he also believes that a group of new, personalized religions will eventually fill the emerging gap (Luckmann 1990; also see Dobbelaere 1985, 1987). Religious worldviews are no longer accepted of a piece, but constructed à la carte. The religions of the future, he suggests, will consist of a mixture of individualistic “spirituality” and nostalgic fundamentalism.

The most consistently formulated version of the transformation thesis is probably that set forth by Parsons (1977a, 1977b; also see Bellah 1970). Like Luckmann, he believed that the institutional influence of the Western Church was increasingly confined to the private sphere. Unlike Luckmann, however, he believed that the influence of Christian values remained pervasive throughout Western societies. Indeed, he argued that these values had undergone a process of “generalization” and formed the sacred core of the “social system” and its constituent parts.

1 Of course, in Saint-Simon’s scheme, the “spiritual power” of modern civilization was not the old church of the priests, but the new church of the scientists. I will return to this point below.
Thus, while the sacred had become more fragmented it had not become less public. Naturally, there are also a variety of hybrid positions. Wilson (1982, 1985), for example, essentially proposes a mixture of the disappearance and decline theses. He argues that religious values are rooted in the social practices of traditional communities and that the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft—“modernization”—tends inevitably and irreversibly to undermine their authority. But he shrinks from arguing that religion will ultimately disappear, even though this would seem to be the logical implication of his theory. In fact, most of Wilson’s empirical work focuses on “sectarianism” and “new religions” (Wilson 1967, 1970, 1990; also see Bruce 1995, 1996; Wallis 1975, 1984). Thus, although Wilson clearly sees a general trend toward religious decline, he does not claim that it will culminate in the disappearance of religion.

The argument about secularization developed in Berger’s Sacred Canopy (1967) can be seen as a cross between the privatization and transformation theses. Like Parsons, Berger (1967:133) believes that traditional religion continues to have a public impact, but he sees this impact as relatively slight. It is in the private sphere, he says, that religion has its greatest effects:

Religion manifests itself as public rhetoric and private virtue. In other words, insofar as religion is common it lacks “reality,” and insofar as it is “real,” it lacks commonality. (P. 134)

Berger’s position is sharply criticized by Casanova. Casanova (1994) would certainly agree that religious and political institutions have become more sharply differentiated over time, especially in the modern West. But in his view this has not resulted in a thoroughgoing “privatization” of religion; on the contrary, it has allowed religious institutions to develop a more distinctively religious face and to reenter the public arena in a more aggressive way.

Paradoxical as it may seem, hybrid positions exist that combine the disappearance and transformation theses. The clearest examples of this position are found in the later works of Comte and Saint-Simon. In their early works, of course, both had argued that science would supplant religion. Later, however, they came to see science itself as a sort of religion. In fact, they even organized their followers into competing “churches”! Though somewhat more ambiguous, Durkheim’s work on the sociology of religion would also seem to fall into this category. Like most other French intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Durkheim believed that traditional religion was on the wane, but he did not believe that society could function without religion. He believed that new religions—civic and national religions—would eventually take the place of the old ones. Modern societies were thus in a sort of liminal phase. In Durkheim’s words: “The old gods are growing old or dying and new gods have not been born” (quoted from Pickering 1984:442).

Rather than speaking of “secularization theory,” then, it is more accurate to speak of a “secularization paradigm” (Kuhn 1970; Tschannen 1991) or, better yet, of a secularization “research program” (Lakatos 1978). As various revisionists have pointed out, the “core” of the “program” is differentiation theory (Casanova 1994:18; Tschannen 1991:403; Yamane 1997:115). This “core,” I argue, is surrounded by a “protective belt” that consists of the various theses on the fate of individual religiosity in the modern world—the theses of disappearance, decline, privatization, and transformation (Figure 1).

As Figure 1 makes clear, secularization theory is not a unified theory of religious decline. It is a family of theories of religious change, some of which posit religious decline, and some of which do not. One of the most striking features of these theories is how few of them actually posit the disappearance of religion. Indeed, to my knowledge, the only modern theory of secularization that does is Gauchet’s (1997) recently translated essay on The Disenchantment of the World. And even this theory “allows for the survival, in the personal sphere, of a residue [of traditional religion] . . . that perhaps will never disappear” (Gauchet 1997:4). Of course, the decline thesis still has its defenders, but so do the privatization and transformation theses. Thus, to suggest that contemporary theories of secularization are all theories of religious decline is a gross oversimplification.
The evidence against secularization theory developed by advocates of the new paradigm consists of two main bodies of research. The first focuses on levels of religious participation in the United States. This research clearly shows that rates of church membership and church attendance in the United States have increased steadily since disestablishment and strongly suggests that local and regional variations in levels of church membership and church attendance are positively correlated with levels of "religious pluralism" and negatively correlated with levels of "religious regulation" (Finke 1990; Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996; Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1988, 1992; Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Warner 1993). In plain English: The greater the number of churches competing for members and the less interference from government (e.g., by subsidizing or otherwise advantaging a particular church), the higher the level of religious participation. Defenders of the old paradigm have questioned the methodology behind some of these studies, and they have questioned the relationship between religious pluralism and religious vitality, but they have not disputed the trend toward increased religious participation in the United States nor have they questioned the negative effects of religious regulation (Land, Deane, and Blau 1991, Olson 1998, 1999; for an unreconstructed defense of secularization, also see Bruce 1996; Wallis and Bruce 1991).

The second body of evidence developed by advocates of the new paradigm consists of survey data on individual religious beliefs in the United States and Western Europe (Greeley 1989; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). This evidence shows that what some take to be the core beliefs of Western Christianity (the existence of God, the efficacy of prayer, the promise of the afterlife) are still accepted by the overwhelming majority of the American population and by large majorities in the European countries. Critics have emphasized that other beliefs that were also core beliefs at one time (e.g., the existence of the Devil, the power of miracles, the threat of damnation) have generally declined and that acceptance of patently non-Christian doctrines (astrology, witchcraft, the New Age) has also increased. But they have presented no evidence suggesting that religious and mystical worldviews are being supplanted by scientific and rational ones.

As should be evident by now, the attack launched by advocates of the "new paradigm" does not bear on the core of the "old paradigm" (differentiation theory). Indeed, the attack has focused solely on the protective belt and, more specifically, on its lower half (the disappearance and decline theses).
Thus, while certain implications of certain versions of the “old paradigm” have been called into question (“disproved” would be much too strong a word here), the central claim of secularization theory—that religious and nonreligious institutions and values have become increasingly distinct from one another—still remains unchallenged. The core of the “old paradigm” remains as solid as ever.

It would be unfair to represent the new paradigm in purely negative terms, however. The new paradigm is more than a critique of the old; it has made a number of positive contributions to the sociology of religion, both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, advocates of the “new paradigm” have noted the persistent interest in religious and “spiritual” ideas in the modern West and the surprisingly high levels of cross-national variation in religious participation. These are clearly facts that need to be explained—and facts that stalwarts of the old paradigm have not explained. Theoretically, supporters of the “new paradigm” have shifted the focus from “demand-side” explanations of religious participation, which emphasize the (putatively) declining “plausibility” of religious worldviews, toward “supply-side” explanations of religious participation, which emphasize the (apparent and opposed) effects of “religious pluralism” and “regulation.” This shift of perspective has proved illuminating.

Great as the animus has been between supporters of the two “paradigms,” it is not at all clear that the paradigms themselves are inherently irreconcilable. As I have stressed, the core concern of the old paradigm has been with the gradual differentiation of the religious and nonreligious spheres over time and with the centrality and significance of religious values and institutions within society as a whole. The core concern of the new paradigm, by contrast, has been with the internal structure of the religious sphere and the effects that this structure has on aggregate levels of individual religiosity. Given these rather disparate concerns, it is possible that the two paradigms may actually be complementary.

Before taking up this question, however, it is necessary to examine the “cores” of the two theories in somewhat greater detail, for it is at the core, in my judgment, that their real weaknesses lie. The core claim of the “old paradigm” is that religious and nonreligious values and institutions have become increasingly differentiated over time. In the West, it is argued, Medieval unity was undermined by the Reformation split, which in turn gave rise to modern pluralism. This schema is oversimplified, because the differentiation of the three major churches (Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic) during the Reformation era went hand-in-hand with a deifferentiation among church, state, and society at the territorial level. The core claim of the new paradigm, by contrast, is that levels of individual religiosity are highest where religious free markets prevail: The more religious competition there is, the more religious participation there will be. Based on this theory, levels of individual religiosity should be low in the Medieval period, when the Western religious economy was a monopoly; higher in the Reformation era, when the religious economy became a three-headed oligopoly; and higher still in the modern period, when state-run firms have given way to religious free markets. This interpretation also has its merits, but it too is fundamentally flawed, because what changes over this period is not so much the level of individual religiosity as its very character. To suggest that Reformation society was less religious than our own is problematic, and to suggest that Medieval society was less religious than Reformation society more problematic still.

THE ASCENDING IMAGE: HISTORICAL CRITIQUE AND THEORETICAL RE-CONSTRUCTION

In their “supply-side re-interpretation of the ‘secularization’ of Europe,” Starke and Iannaccone (1994) suggest that modern Europe is actually more Christian than was Medieval Europe. To support this claim, they invoke the work of two French scholars, the sociologist, Le Bras, and the historian, Delumeau. Pointing to the prevalence of “pagan” practices and beliefs among the medieval populace, Le Bras (1955–1956) and Delumeau ([1971] 1977) argued that Europe was not really Christianized until after the Reformation, an argument that seems to confirm the ascending image of Western reli-
gious development. Over the last 20 years, however, medieval and early-modern historians have produced a growing body of evidence that suggests that the Le Bras–Delumeau thesis is both exaggerated and simplistic. The evidence strongly suggests that the Middle Ages were rather more Christian, and the early-modern period rather less Christian, than Le Bras and Delumeau have allowed. And the evidence further reveals forms of religio-cultural change that are not captured by the concept of “Christianization.” Here, I review the evidence against the Le Bras-Delumeau thesis, and argue that the Protestant Reformation is best understood as a process of religious and cultural rationalization. I begin with a review of the medieval historiography.

**Historical Critique I: The Curious Fall and Partial Rise of the “Golden Age” Thesis**

Outside university history departments, the Middle Ages is still commonly viewed as a period of universal Christian faith—the “Golden Age” of the Western Church. This view is an old one, whose roots go back to the late eighteenth century and the beginnings of German Romanticism (Van Engen 1986). Horrified by the changes proposed, and later wrought, by the philosophical radicals, romanticist intellectuals portrayed the Middle Ages as an era of unity, harmony, and religious belief.

Until the late 1960s, most historians were also apt to paint the Middle Ages in golden hues. Of course, they did not succumb to the patent nostalgia of the Romantics; they were well aware of the many divisions that lurked beneath the surface unity of Latin Christendom—political, social, cultural, and even religious divisions. But they did not question the fundamentally Christian character of medieval society. In Southern’s (1953:228) *Making of the Middle Ages*, for instance, the standard survey for the better part of two decades, non-Christian beliefs and practices do not receive a single word, and the Christianization of Europe receives only a brief aside. For Southern, there was no question that medieval Europe was a Christian civilization.

Le Bras was one of the first to openly criticize this assumption. Attacking the idea that France had been “de-Christianized” following the French Revolution, he retorted that “a society must be Christianized before it can be de-Christianized” (Le Bras 1964), a remark repeatedly invoked by advocates of the new paradigm. His assault on the Golden Age thesis was then elaborated by Delumeau ([1971] 1977) in his influential study of *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire*. Delumeau flatly asserted that “the ‘golden age’ of Christianity is a legend.” “[O]n the eve of the Reformation,” he continued, “the average Westerner was but superficially Christianized” ([1971] 1977:160–61). In support of this contention, Delumeau adduced striking examples of popular superstition, such as the report of a French friar who observed women from Brittany “sweeping the nearest chapel in their village, and then collecting the dust and throwing it into the air, hoping by this means to procure a favorable wind for their husbands or sons at sea” (quoted from Delumeau [1971] 1977:162). He concludes that medieval Christianity “camouflaged” pagan folk beliefs more than it suppressed them.

For English-speaking audiences, the seminal text was Thomas’s (1971) classic study of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Like Delumeau, Thomas was concerned mainly with the Reformation era, but in a background chapter on the magic of the Medieval Church, he argues that “the distinction between magic and religion was an impossibly fine one” prior to the sixteenth century (Thomas 1971:33). In support of this contention, he shows how lay people and local clergymen appropriated the rituals of the church and infused them with traditions of folk magic: Peasants retained pieces of the consecrated host in their hands or mouths and used them to “fertilize” their fields and protect their crops from insects (pp. 41–43); parish priests said special masses for cattle, crops, ships, tools, wells, and kilns, among other things, and were known to “baptize” farm animals and human afterbirths (pp. 38–40); and so on.

Delumeau and Thomas were early-modernists, but it was not long before medievalists were echoing their interpretations. One of the first medievalists to explore the relationship between popular and elite culture in
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A deeper and more contextualized way was Schmitt ([1979] 1983). The starting point for his analysis is a single exemplum in an uncompleted treatise by Stephen of Bourbon (d. 1261), a Dominican inquisitor who traveled widely through southern France. In it, Bourbon recounts an incident that occurred in the diocese of Lyon sometime around the middle of the thirteenth century. While preaching against “the reading of oracles” and “hearing confession,” Bourbon learned that a number of local women had taken their sick children to the shrine of a certain Saint Guinefort. After interrogating several of them, he learned that Saint Guinefort was not in fact a man, but rather a dog—a greyhound that, so they said, had once belonged to a local knight and had been killed. Having been left alone in the castle with the knight’s newborn son, the dog was set upon by a snake that had invaded the house to devour the baby. The dog fought valiantly and eventually killed the snake but sustained serious injuries. When the master returned, he saw the dog covered with blood. Assuming that the dog had eaten the baby, the man fell into a violent rage and killed it. He then discovered that the baby was still alive, and after finding the snake, quickly realized that he had killed the dog unjustly. Filled with regret, he gave the dog a ceremonious burial. Nevertheless his lands soon became barren, and he and his wife died shortly thereafter. The incident inspired great wonder on the part of the local peasants, and many began to bring their sick children to the site of “Saint Guinefort’s” grave, where they performed various healing rituals. Determined to put an end to these practices, Bourbon called together the local people, preached a sermon on superstition, burned the dog’s bones, and destroyed the sacred woods. Drawing on evidence from a variety of different sources—folklore, hagiography, ethnography, archaeology—Schmitt ([1979] 1983) argues that the cult was derived from a fusion of an indigenous folk tradition with official Christian doctrine and, on a broader level, that there were “two cultures” in the Middle Ages: the one “literate, Latinate, urban, [and] clerical”; the other “popular . . . oral, vernacular, peasant, secular, Christian also (although in a different sense)” (p. 7; also see Ginzburg 1982, [1966] 1985).

The two-cultures hypothesis was strongly attacked several years later on both interpretive and methodological grounds in a widely read article by Van Engen. Van Engen (1986) applauds the efforts of the revisionists “to deal with folk practices on their own terms, and not just as some degraded form of Christianity,” but, he insists, “to argue that the people had a wholly distinct religious culture, not somehow amalgamated in Christian practice is quite another matter” (p. 530). Simply because the common people were excluded from the written culture of the clerical hierarchy, he points out, does not mean that they had no access to knowledge of the Christian faith. Through sermons, passion plays, icons, church windows, and other oral and visual media, the “average Westerner” was able to attain a basic knowledge of the Bible and its tenets. Moreover, he argued, to focus solely on doctrine and belief is to fundamentally misapprehend the nature of medieval religion, which centered on liturgy and ritual. He concludes that “medieval Christianity is better conceived as comprised of complex and diverse elements spread across a very wide but more or less continuous spectrum” (Van Engen 1986:532; also see Swanson 1995).

This is essentially the position taken by the Russian historian, Gurevich. Like the other revisionists, Gurevich (1988:90–91) sees “medieval popular culture” as a complex mixture of the new and the old, in which a “magical worldview” becomes fused with “Christian beliefs.” Unlike them, however, he does not see it as wholly distinct from the “official clerical culture.” Indeed, based on close readings of various genres of medieval literature written for a popular audience (e.g., penitentials, exempla, and catechisms), he shows the degree to which popular traditions (e.g., magic, epic, folklore) had been absorbed into the clerical culture (Jolly 1996; Kieckheffer 1990). Gurevich also challenges the assumption, implicit in many revisionist works, that one can speak of “medieval popular culture” in the singular. Insofar as it was popular, he suggests, medieval culture was also local. Because there was so much variation between the religious practices and observances of individual parishes, Gurevich (1988) suggests that we should perhaps
speak of “parish Catholicism” rather than of “popular religion” tout court (p. 5).

An even sharper attack on the two-cultures hypothesis is Duffy’s (1992) much-touted study of Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580. Like Gurevich, Duffy (1992) sees medieval Christianity as a complex amalgam of magic and faith. Unlike Gurevich, however, Duffy (1992:2) does not believe that “popular religion” was confined to the popular classes or that it was opposed to “official religion” in any meaningful sense. Drawing on a wealth of published and unpublished sources, Duffy shows that various forms of “superstition” and “magic” were practiced among both the low born and the high born and that they were tolerated or even sanctioned by the church. In the Middle Ages, concludes Duffy (1992:278), magic was not relegated to the margins; it was embedded in the mainstream.

Over the last 20 years, then, church historians have cast increasing doubt on the Le Bras-Delumeau thesis—the thesis that the common people of Western Europe were “barely Christianized” prior to the Reformation. The first doubts were raised during the late 1970s and early 1980s by scholars such as Schmitt who showed that “popular” or “lay” religion in the Middle Ages was not an unadulterated system of pagan “folk beliefs,” as Le Bras and Delumeau had suggested, but an amalgam of Christian and non-Christian elements. These scholars argued that there was a sharp divide between the religious culture of the laity and the religious culture of the clergy. This claim was then called into question during the late 1970s and early 1980s by scholars such as Duffy, who showed that “official” or “clerical” religion was not really that different from “popular” or “lay” religion—it, too, contained many “pagan” and “magical” elements. The picture that has emerged from their research is one of a single religious culture in which “magic” and “religion” are so intimately commingled as to be indistinguishable. In a sense, then, medieval historiography has come full circle, insofar as medieval culture is again regarded as a Christian culture. Still, there is a difference between the old and the new historiography. If medievalists of the pre-Delumeau era were wont to describe their period as an “Age of Belief,” medievalists of the post-Delumeau era would probably be more inclined to describe it as an “Age of Magic,” or better yet, an “Age of Ritual.”

Of course, the fact that the medieval populace was much more Christian than Le Bras and Delumeau had originally assumed does not preclude the possibility that the early-modern populace was even more Christian still. That is, it does not undermine a weaker version of the Christianization thesis and of the ascending image. But the process of Christianization that followed the Reformation was also not as complete or as successful as Le Bras and Delumeau believed.

**Historical Critique II: The “Popular Reformation” Makes a Comeback**

Until recently, most historians tended to depict the Protestant Reformation as a popular movement—as the product of widespread anticlericalism and deep-seated religious hunger. Like the Golden Age thesis, the popular reformation thesis is an old one. Indeed, it is as old as the Reformation. It was the reformers themselves who first traced the success of the Protestant movement to the corruption of the Catholic Church and the religious needs of the populace. And while some conservative Catholics decried this portrait of medieval Catholicism, many reform-minded clerics embraced it because it helped them overcome the opposition of their more conservative brethren.

Le Bras was one of the first to strike a blow at the popular reformation thesis. Le Bras (1955–1956:1, 267–301) firmly rejected the Golden Age thesis. In his view, the medieval populace was generally indifferent or even hostile toward Christianity. From his perspective, the Reformation could hardly be seen as the result of a popular movement. For Le Bras, it was the clergy of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation that first “Christianized” the populace, a view that is very much in line with the ascending image and the new paradigm.

But Le Bras was a sociologist, and it was not until the 1970s that his approach began to have a significant impact upon early-modern historians. Here again, the key interlocutor was Delumeau ([1971] 1977; also see Bossy 1970). For Catholicism between
Luther and Voltaire was not simply an attack on the “Golden Age” myth; it was also—indeed, primarily—an attempt to sketch out a new interpretation of the Counter-Reformation. Like Le Bras, Delumeau believed that the Christianization of the populace did not really begin until after the Reformation. This view had an enormous influence on French historiography and on the numerous studies of French dioceses written during the 1970s and 1980s. And it was seconded in a widely read and highly influential essay by Muchembled (1984), who suggested that we should not speak simply of a “Christianization” of the populace, but of an encompassing process of “mass acculturation,” in which early-modern elites impressed their values and world views upon the popular classes.

A somewhat more nuanced account of the “acculturation” process was offered up in Christian’s oft-cited study of Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain. Drawing on extensive surveys of religious life conducted by the Spanish monarchy in 1575–1580 and again in 1783–1789, Christian (1981) shows that the Spanish countryside harbored a rich and diverse array of local cults and shrines during the late sixteenth century and that the main effect of the Counter Reformation was not so much to suppress these shrines and cults as to change their focus—generally, from the cult of the saints to the Passion of Christ. This more complex picture of the “acculturation” process was subsequently confirmed in various local studies (e.g., Cousin 1985; Forster 1992; Hsia 1984; Luria 1991; Torre 1990) that showed that members of local churches, both clergy and laity, accepted some elements of the “new” Catholicism, such as the stress on Eucharistic devotion, but not others, such as restrictions on Carnival celebrations (on Germany, also see Scribner 1994). Recently, Delumeau (1989), himself, has affirmed the position of the revisionists in a book that explores the persistence of traditional religion in early-modern Europe.

Thus, recent studies of Catholic Europe strongly suggest that the degree of “acculturation” actually achieved by proponents of the Counter Reformation was more modest than Le Bras and Delumeau had initially suggested.

The persistence of traditional religion was not confined to Catholic Europe, as recent work on the English Reformation clearly demonstrates (for a nonpartisan overview, see Maccolloch 1990). Until recently, the dominant view among English historians was that the English Reformation was a “rapid reformation from below” (Dickens 1964). Over the last several decades, however, this interpretation has been subjected to a sustained and penetrating attack by a group of Catholic historians led by Haigh (1975, 1993), Scarisbrick (1984), and Duffy (1992). Drawing on previously unexamined source materials, they have produced evidence suggesting that the consolidation of English Protestantism was actually the result of a “slow reformation from above” (Haigh 1982).

During the last decade or so, the debate over the direction and speed of the English Reformation has given rise to some highly innovative research. Like the studies of the Counter Reformation cited above, these works strongly suggest that the “reform of popular culture” was much more complex, and much less complete, than the two-tiered model implies. In her groundbreaking study of Cheap Print and Popular Piety, for example, Watt (1991) shows that the interaction between “popular” and “elite” culture proceeded in both directions. Thus, it was not uncommon for members of the elite to consume popular culture, such as ballads, or for printed media to have their origins in oral traditions. Collinson’s (1988) research on the Protestantization process yields a similar picture. These works suggest that the acculturation of the English people and the Protestantization of English culture were ultimately successful. This is indeed the position that has been advanced by a growing number of cultural and literary historians who contend that England had a single “national culture” by the seventeenth century and that this culture was distinctly Protestant (Colley 1992; Helgerson 1992; Pincus 1996; McEachern 1996). But these assertions must be seen in the light of other studies, that demonstrate that traditional, and distinctly un-Protestant, rituals, practices, and narratives such as Candelmas, “rough-ridings,” and ghost tales continued to have a popular following well into the nineteenth century, despite the efforts of the clergy and their sup-
porters to eradicate them (Hutton 1995; Ingram 1984).

Like the recent literature on the Counter Reformation, then, recent work on the English Reformation tends to undercut the acculturation thesis and the two-tiered model of culture that underlies it. It shows that the Protestantization process was supported by certain segments of the popular classes, but that it did not lead to the extirpation of popular culture. Similar conclusions emerge from recent work on the “reformation of popular culture” in Germany (Dixon 1996; Scribner 1996; Wandel 1995).

Over the last two decades, then, our understanding of late-medieval and early-modern religiosity and of the relationship between them has changed considerably. The late-medieval church now appears to have been much more vital and much more Christian than was once believed, while the post-Reformation churches now appear to have been somewhat less successful and less popular than was once believed. Of course, this does not mean that the Christianization thesis is wrong; but it does imply that it is exaggerated—that the early-modern populace was not really that much more “Christian” than their medieval forebears.

In my view, however, the real problem with the Christianization thesis is not so much that it overstates the extent of religious change in the early-modern era as that it fails to capture the character of this change. What changed during the Reformation was not so much the level of religiosity as its character. What occurred, I argue, is a rationalization of religion.

**Theoretical Reconstruction: The Reformation as Rationalization**

With the gradual demise of the acculturation thesis, historians have begun searching for a new conceptual framework within which the differences between late-medieval and early-modern religion can be interpreted and explained. Most of these frameworks rest on a typological contrast of one sort or another. Thus, Eire (1986) conceives the difference in terms of an opposition between a medieval “religion of immanence” and an early-modern “religion of transcendence” (also see Sommerville 1992). Muir (1997) frames it in terms of an opposition between a religion of “images” and a religion of “words” (for a similar argument, see Karant-Nunn 1997). And Scarisbrick (1984) invokes a contrast between “communal” and “individual” forms of religiosity.

Building on the work of these scholars, I argue that the Reformation can be most fruitfully understood as a process of religious rationalization. Specifically, I argue that the Reformation was largely an attempt to eradicate one kind of religiosity (magical, ritual, and communal) and replace it with another (ethical, intellectual, and individual). By *magical religiosity*, I mean religiosity in which the individual believer or believers attempt to prompt divine intervention or gain divine favor (usually material favor or worldly intervention) by means of various formulas or rituals. By *ethical religiosity*, on the other hand, I mean religiosity that centers around the performance and repetition of certain commemorative or propitiatory acts (usually by a priestly class). By *ritual religiosity*, I mean religiosity that centers around the performance of proper conduct or individual supplication (“prayer”). By *intellectual religiosity*, on the other hand, I mean religiosity that centers around the affirmation and propagation of certain basic religious truths or teachings (especially by “lay persons”). Finally, by *communalistic religiosity*, I mean a religiosity whose rituals and practices are oriented primarily toward the welfare—material and spiritual—of the given social community (Gemeinschaft), understood here to comprise both the living and the dead. And by *individualistic religiosity*, I mean a religiosity whose rituals and practices are oriented primarily toward the welfare of the individual believer and, more generally, of the community of the living. My thesis, in sum, is that late-medieval religion contained more magical, ritualistic, and communal elements than did early-modern religion, and that early-modern religion was grounded in the more prosaic, practical, and rationalistic forms of religiosity that have come to be known as “popular culture.”

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2 Some historians have even suggested that it was the “secularization” and “privatization” of traditional religious practices that first created a culture deserving the name “popular culture.”
more ethical, intellectual, and individualistic than late Medieval religion.

Of course, this contrast should not be overdrawn. The late Middle Ages were awash with rationalizing movements (e.g., the Albigensians, the Lollards, the Hussites, and the Modern Devotion), and there were also rationalistic tendencies in the monastic reform movements of the earlier Middle Ages (e.g., the Cistercians and Dominicans). Indeed, historians have often described these movements as precursors or harbingers of the Reformation. At the same time, the early-modern world was hardly devoid of magic, superstition and other elements of traditional religion. Nor were all of these practices and beliefs remnants or survivals of the Medieval era—some were actually new inventions. In fact, neotraditionalistic practices are found even in the most rationalistic religions, such as the Calvinist practice of opening the Bible to random passages in search of divine guidance.

Still, it would be absurd to deny that there were real differences between late-medieval and early-modern religion. One can get some sense of them simply by comparing a “typical” medieval Mass to a “typical” Reformed worship service. The traditional Catholic Mass was centered on the ritual of the Eucharist, and, in particular, on the moment of consecration, the moment at which the bread and wine were believed to “tran-substantiate” into the body and blood of Christ following the priest’s enunciation of the Latin phrase hoc est enim meum. The laity was encouraged to lift their arms and cry out at the moment of consecration, and particularly devout lay people in large cities would often circulate from one Mass to the next in order to witness as many consecrations as possible. By contrast, the typical Reformed worship service focused on the homily, that often lasted for several hours, during which time the congregation was expected to sit quietly and listen attentively. These differing styles of Christian worship were reflected in differing types of church interiors. Walking into a typical parish church of the late-medieval period, one’s attention would first be drawn to the altar, or rather, to the elaborately decorated rood-screen that shielded the altar from the eyes of the laity. Above the rood-screen, in the rood-loft and along the sides of the church, one would see images of Jesus, Mary, and various saints, properly clothed and coiffed and, if the parish were reasonably affluent, various private altars and chapels as well, most of which would have been established and maintained by a prominent family or a local guild or confraternity. Entering into a typical Reformed church from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, by contrast, one’s attention would be drawn not to the small, wooden communion table, but to the elaborately, if simply, carved pulpit and to the benches and pews surrounding it. Otherwise, there would be little to attract the eye, except perhaps a Bible passage or two written on the whitewashed walls. Outside these two churches, religious life would also have been remarkably different. Strolling around a typical cathedral town of the late Middle Ages, one could have easily stumbled into a religious procession, communal feast, mystery play, or some other form of communal celebration. And one would almost certainly have walked by any number of religious establishments (monasteries, confraternities, or chantries) whose purpose, in whole or in part, was to pray for the souls of the dead. Walking about a typical Reformed city of the early seventeenth century, one might have encountered a procession, a feast or a play, but it would certainly not have been religious in character and would likely have been staged under protest from the local clergy and the more devout members of their flock. One would have found the monasteries, confraternities, and chantries being used for new and very different purposes, such as schools, hospitals or workshops. And if one had chanced upon a religious holiday, it would likely have been a solemn day of prayer and fasting that the clergy and the magistrate had decreed in response to a plague, a war, a drought, or some other natural catastrophe that they regarded as a sign of divine wrath. What such contrasts reveal, I argue, is not so much two different levels of religiosity, one of which is less Christian than the other, as two different kinds of religiosity, one of which is less rationalistic than the other.

Of course, the differences would not have been as great if one had chosen to compare traditional Catholicism with Lutheranism,
for while Luther angrily rejected many central elements of Catholic theology, he happily retained many key features of Catholic liturgy, including the elevation of the Host. And the differences would have been smaller still, had one compared pre- and post-Tridentine Catholicism, for the goal of the Catholic reformers was not so much to rationalize Catholic religion as to purge it of its “pagan” elements—“bad” magic, “bad” rituals, and “bad” organizations. Generally speaking, Calvinism was more rationalistic than Lutheranism, and Lutheranism was more rationalistic than reformed Catholicism.3

I emphasize that the “size” of the differences observed would vary with the temporal points of reference chosen. The difference would almost certainly be smaller if one focused on the years 1500 and 1550, and greater if one focused on the years 1400 and 1650. There are two reasons for this. The first is that more rationalistic forms of religiosity were attracting growing numbers of followers throughout the fifteenth century, especially among the urban and the affluent. And the second is that it took a long time for post-Reformation religiosity to attain popular acceptance, especially in the countryside and among humbler folk.

These caveats and qualifications aside, the Reformation was still a crucial turning point in the rationalization process. In a matter of years, and sometimes even days, it swept away the bulwarks of conservative Christendom (the mendicant friars, the religious confraternities, the episcopal hierarchy) and lifted up the forces of religious reform (evangelical clergymen, humanist magistrates and anticlerical laymen). It created a religio-political constellation in which the rationalization process could unfold quickly and with little elite opposition.

But couldn’t rationalization itself be regarded as a kind of ascent? Is one ascending image simply being substituted for another? Certainly, there can be no doubt that the Reformation helped lay the foundations of modern culture. It created a “disenchanted world” in which natural science could unfold (Cohen 1990; Merton [1938] 1970). It de-sacralized the image, thereby clearing space for a “secular” world of art (Michalski 1993). And it brought a heightened interiorization of religious experience that pointed the way toward modern Romanticism and consumerism (Campbell 1987). But whether this transformation is regarded as an ascent, a descent, or something else is a purely normative question that is beyond the scope of this essay and of social science.

THE DESCENDING IMAGE: HISTORICAL CRITIQUE AND THEORETICAL RE-CONSTRUCTION

Since the days of Saint-Simon, sociologists have seen the Reformation primarily as a process of social differentiation in which the original unity of Latin Christendom gave way to the modern system of religious pluralism, and they have tended to regard the breakup of the Western Church as a key cause of the secularization process. Similarly, since the Reformation, historians have been mainly concerned with tracing out the theological, liturgical, and organizational differences among the major confessions—Lutheranism, Calvinism and Catholicism. Each interpretation thus tended to confirm and reinforce the other. In recent years, however, historians have begun to emphasize the developmental similarities across the major churches rather than the theological differences among them. In particular, they point to the close alliance between church and state in the “Confessional Age” and to the efforts of religious and political elites to discipline and control the populace. Here, I review the recent literature on “confessionalization” and “social disciplining” and suggest that the Reformation involved processes of de-differentiation as well as processes of differentiation. In particular, I argue that while the Reformation may have laid the seeds for a more secular society, the Confessional Era was anything but a secular age.

3 I should emphasize, however, that these are broad generalizations to which there were many individual exceptions. The confessions were internally diverse, and all contained more and less rationalized movements and currents. Thus, the Catholic Church contained highly rationalistic groups and movements (e.g., the Jesuits and Jansenists), while the Reformed Church gave birth to ecstatic and mystical sects and movements (e.g., the evangelical and revivalist movements of colonial America).
Prologue: Church, State, and Society in the Middle Ages and the Confessional Era

The Reformation led to numerous changes in the structure of European society. In the present context, two changes are particularly important: (1) the fragmentation of the Latin Church and (2) the emergence of territorial or "state" churches. Where there had been one "confession," Western Christianity, there were now three: Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism or Reformed Protestantism. And where there had been one church, Catholic and universal, there was now a host of territorial or quasi-territorial churches.

Secularization theorists have usually been quick to emphasize the first development, the differentiation of the confessions (see Figure 2). But they have generally failed to recognize the second, the de-differentiation of church, state and society (see Figure 3). This oversight is understandable insofar as it was also common among Reformation historians, who tended to highlight the emergence and development of the doctrinal splits between Catholics and Protestants. But this has changed. Today, early-modern historians are more inclined to highlight the parallels between the Catholic and Protestant developments. In particular, they emphasize the close alliances between religious and political elites that emerged during the Reformation era and the process of social and cultural transformation that resulted from it, a process that they commonly refer to as "confessionalization."  

The Confessionalization Paradigm: A Historical and Analytical Overview

In traditional accounts, the Reformation is usually portrayed as an essentially religious process driven by the diffusion and acceptance of Protestant ideas (Bainton 1956). In more recent accounts, by contrast, greater emphasis is placed on the role which social and political elites and interests played in shaping and imposing Protestantism (Klueting 1989; Schilling 1988; Zeeden

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4 Some historians draw a distinction between these two terms, using "Reformed Protestantism" to refer to the version of Protestantism that arose in southern Germany and Switzerland and "Calvinism" to refer to the variant of Reformed Protestantism that arose in Geneva. I will use these terms interchangeably.

5 The terms "confession" and "confessionalization" are translations of the German "Konfession" and "Konfessionalisierung," that have a somewhat more specific meaning than their English cognates. In German, "Konfession" refers to a community of believers that shares a common faith or "confession" (Bekenntis). "Konfessionalisierung" thus refers to that process by which distinctive communities of believers and distinctive understandings of Christianity emerge in tandem with one another. In what follows, I will use the terms "confession" and "confessionalization" in these ways.
Contemporary historians have thus come to see the developments of the Reformation era in terms of two interrelated processes: the emergence of three doctrinally, liturgically, and organizationally distinct "confessions," and their gradual imposition on an often passive population, a process they refer to as "confessionalization."

I stress several points about this process. The first is that confessionalization did not begin at the same time or proceed at the same pace for all churches or in all places. Roughly speaking, confessionalization began first in the Protestant territories of the Empire (ca. 1525), somewhat later in the Reformed polities of the North Atlantic region (ca. 1570), and later still in the Catholic countries of Western and Eastern Europe (ca. 1600) (Reinhard and Schilling 1995; Rublack 1992; Verein für Reformationsgeschichte 1986). Second, the confessions did not develop in isolation from one another. On the contrary, the Lutherans reacted against the (old) Catholics, the Calvinists against the Lutherans, the new Catholics against the old Catholics, and everybody reacted against the Baptists and other "sectarians." For both these reasons, I examine the development of the major confessions sequentially, beginning with Lutheranism, moving on to Calvinism, and concluding with Catholicism.

Confessionalization was not solely a religious process. It was a social, cultural, and political process as well. On the religious level, confessionalization involved not only the emergence of distinct and opposed doctrines and rituals, but the (re)imposition of ecclesiastical discipline on both the clergy and the laity. On the social level, confessionalization involved efforts to "Christianize" everyday life, and to bring individual conduct into line with Biblical law, a campaign in which church and state often joined hands. On the cultural level, confessionalization involved efforts to suppress popular "superstitions" and to impose a new, more fully "Christian" ethos. Finally, on the political level, confessionalization meant a deepening of the alliance between church and state and a tightening of the relationship between confessional and "national" identity. All of these
processes are evident within each of the major confessions, but the mechanisms and outcomes of the confessionalization process varied considerably among the different “national” churches. Thus, in what follows, I will examine the individual confessions and the various dimensions of the confessionalization processes separately. This sets the stage for cross-national and cross-dimensional comparisons at the end of this section.

The Religious Dimension: The (Re)imposition of Ecclesiastical Discipline

During the late Classical era (ca. 400–600), the Western Church employed a harsh system of ecclesiastical discipline in which notorious sinners were compelled to perform arduous acts of public penance (e.g., fasting, abstinence, wearing sackcloth and ashes), were barred from marrying or taking orders, and were required, in many cases, to join a special “order of penitents”—all this, moreover, a “privilege” that could be invoked only once in a lifetime (Watkins 1961:2). Beginning around the sixth century, however, the system of public penance was gradually supplanted by the practice of auricular confession, in which the individual sinner was interrogated by a local priest within the confines of the parish church, sentenced to perform private acts of penitence, and then ritually absolved of sin (Lea 1896).

Protestant and Catholic reformers regarded these practices as far too lax, and the restoration of the old discipline was one of their central demands. But the (re)imposition of religious discipline took very different forms in each of the major confessions.

In Lutheran principalities, such as Saxony, Württemberg, and Hessia, royal councillors, trained jurists, and university theologians were appointed to special visitation committees that traveled through the kingdom, interviewing local clergymen and parishioners about the state of the church (Schilling 1988). Thereafter, detailed laws or “church ordinances” were promulgated by the crown, and regular visitations were conducted by specially appointed church “superintendents” or by centrally administered “royal consistories.” In this way, local clergymen in the Lutheran territories were subjected to the oversight of the church hierarchy, and the church hierarchy was subjected to the supervision of the state.

Lutheran ecclesiastical discipline was further buttressed by the newly established Protestant marriage courts. Composed of laymen and clerics, these judicial bodies were the historical successors of the old Catholic marriage courts. Medieval marriage law was notoriously ambiguous and effectively allowed couples to establish a valid union without benefit of clergy (Brundage 1987; Herlihy 1985). Although the nobility generally adhered to church norms (Ermakoff 1997), the common people apparently did not (Outhwaite 1995). Protestant reformers were determined to put an end to the practice of “clandestine marriage” and instituted laws that required, among other things, that couples obtain parental consent, announce their engagement in public, proclaim their wedding bans in church, and register their marriage with the local pastor or magistrate (Hartig 1959). While the main purpose of the Protestant marriage courts was to enforce the new marriage laws, they soon became involved in policing all aspects of marital and sexual behavior, from fornication and adultery to spousal abuse and incompatibility. Here, as elsewhere, church and state worked closely together in the pursuit of common ends.

In the Reformed Church, discipline was even more central, and even more severe. Indeed, the Reformed Church developed a separate institutional mechanism for enforcing ecclesiastical discipline at the congregational level: the church consistory. The origins of the Calvinist consistory can be traced back to the Protestant marriage courts established in the Reformed cities of Switzerland and southern Germany during the 1520s and 1530s (Köhler 1932–1942). But it was in Geneva that the consistory first took on its distinctive and lasting shape. The Genevan consistory was composed of several dozen lay “elders” together with all of the city’s ordained ministers (Kingdon 1990). Suspected sinners were summoned before the consistory, which interrogated them, and, if necessary, dispensed an appropriate punishment, ranging from a stern tongue-lashing to public penance to excommunication and banishment. Thousands of Genevan citizens were subjected to disci-
plinary proceedings of this sort during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (Indeed, it is estimated that as much as a tenth of the population may have been “under censure” at any given time.) Calvin regarded the consistory as the “muscles” from which the church drew its strength, and as Calvinism spread during the second half of the sixteenth century, the consistory spread with it to Scotland, France, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany (Garrison 1980; Graham 1996; Rooodenburg 1990).

Had these spiritual courts worked in isolation, their efficacy might have been rather limited. But in most cases they worked closely with the worldly courts and local rulers. To be sure, there were usually no formal links among the consistories and the civil courts, but in a world in which the line between “sin” and “crime” was blurry at best (Schilling 1987) and in which spiritual and worldly offices were often filled by the same men, the spiritual and worldly systems of justice tended to be tightly intertwined. Thus, the consistory might report a particularly grievous offense to the magistrate so that a spiritual sanction might be supplemented with a worldly one—and vice versa.

The Catholic Church did not possess a specialized institution comparable to the Calvinist consistory, but it did have a variety of mechanisms for enforcing discipline. The most famous (and infamous) of these was the Spanish Inquisition. Its original purpose was to root out Jewish converts to Christianity (the so-called conversos) and Moors suspected of Muslim sympathies (the moriscos). By the mid-sixteenth century, however, the Spanish Inquisition had, to all appearances, fulfilled this mission. Swept up in the spirit of the Catholic Reformation, that was actively promoted by Spain’s Hapsburg rulers, it now turned its sights toward the general population, toward the “Old Christians” who had not yet absorbed the ascetic spirit of the new Church (Haliczer 1990; Nalle 1987).

Most of the prosecutions during this period involved blasphemy, sorcery, and, most important, sexual misconduct. In addition to its numerous salaried officials, the Inquisition appointed thousands of unpaid lay familiari who reported and investigated suspected heretics in their towns or villages. Many parish priests also lent their eyes and ears to the Holy Office. And if this network of informers was not as reliable or omnipresent as has sometimes been suggested, it did not need to be; by the early seventeenth century, popular fear and respect for the Inquisition were so great that the number of “voluntary” confessions soon came to exceed the number of coerced ones. The Spanish populace, it appears, had begun to internalize the norms and expectations propagated by the Holy Office (Flynn 1991). The Roman Inquisition has not been as intensively studied as the Spanish Inquisition (L’Inquisizione romana 1991), but there appear to be strong parallels, particularly in the gradual shift from the persecution of heretics to the prosecution of immorality and witchcraft (Tedeschi 1991).

Another vehicle of discipline and reform—in fact, the primary vehicle outside Spain—was the episcopal office. The first and most famous of the great reform bishops was San Carlo Borromeo (1538–1584) of Milan (Headley and Tomaro 1988). Shortly after his appointment in 1563, Borromeo ordered that the Tridentine Decrees be published without alteration or delay—this despite the loud protests of the city magistrate, which was used to administering the local parish as it saw fit—and summoned a meeting of all parish clergy, the first of many such “dioecesan synods.” He then launched a successful campaign to restore the power and authority of the Church by reviving and expanding the jurisdictions of the old ecclesiastical courts and by making use of his right to appoint a famiglia armata, a sort of all-purpose mercenary regiment that served as an episcopal police force and personal garde du corps. Borromeo also made a concerted effort to reach the common people: He conducted an active, preaching ministry; encouraged frequent communion and confession among his parishioners (Delumeau 1990:20ff.); helped create special “Schools of Christian Doctrine,” where young children were taught the tenets of the Catholic faith (Grendler 1984); and established “disciplined” lay confraternities, such as the Compagnia della Penitenza, which performed acts of charity and propagated rituals of popular devotion (Zardin 1982). Naturally, the reformist offensive met with a certain degree of resistance, particularly from the young, the well-to-do, and all those who favored a more sensual and
“libertine” style of life (Zardin 1983). But by the end of the sixteenth century, Milan had become a model bishopric, and Borromeo the model bishop (Alberigo 1986). And by the middle of the seventeenth century, the episcopal reforming drive was beginning to show notable successes, even in some rural areas (Torre 1992). Reforming bishops also played an important role in France (Ferte 1962; Hoffman 1984).

The clergy were not the only force behind reform, however. On the contrary, they received considerable help from religious “confraternities”—lay brotherhoods dedicated, at least in theory, to performing good works and propagating the faith. Religious confraternities were not a new phenomenon. Some, in fact, dated back to the thirteenth century. But the sixteenth century witnessed a wave of new establishments: the Oratorians in Spain, the Marian congregations in France, and a bevy of “arch-confraternities” in Italy (Black 1989; Châtelier 1989; Flynn 1989). Unlike many of their predecessors, which were often better known for their drunken revelry than for their good works, the new confraternities were devoted to encouraging piety among their members, countering the Protestant threat, and spreading the Catholic faith. The confraternities, moreover, were merely the cutting edge of a wider movement of lay devotion, that was manifested in the growing numbers of shrines and pilgrimages and an increasing frequency of confession and communion. The movement, moreover, was actively supported and promoted by the Catholic hierarchy. Seventeenth century Catholicism, then, experienced a confluence of reformism “from above” with revivalism “from below” that equaled and perhaps even exceeded the vigor of sixteenth century Protestantism.

The (re)establishment of ecclesiastical discipline was thus a joint effort between reformist clergymen and pious laymen. Of course, there were variations in the form that this cooperation took. In the Catholic countries, the clerical hierarchy generally retained formal control over the key disciplinary mechanisms, with the laity usually playing a supporting role. In the Protestant countries, by contrast, the situation was reversed: The laity exercised formal control and the clergy played the supporting role. But the overall trend was clearly toward a de-differentiation of secular and religious roles and “functions.”

**The Social Dimension: Respublica Christiana**

In pre-Reformation Europe, relief for the poor was provided by a disparate and dizzying array of public and private institutions—city magistrates, local parishes, religious confraternities, and travelers hostels (“hospitals”), to name only the most important—and a good portion of it was monopolized by members of various “mendicant” orders, such as the Dominicans, who were individually “poor” (i.e., propertyless) but collectively wealthy (Mollat 1978). Local magistrates in many European cities had attempted to reform the traditional system of poor relief during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in a few particularly large and developed metropolises (e.g., Venice and Florence), they appear to have succeeded (Henderson 1994; Pullan 1971). In most parts of Europe, however, serious change was blocked by the mendicant orders and other conservative forces. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, then, most institutions of poor relief were still under the control of the Church.

The arrival of Protestantism dramatically altered the political and ideological constellation. Traditional opponents of reform, such as the mendicant orders and the religious confraternities, were swept off the stage, and religious forces more sympathetic to change were swept into power. Echoing the arguments of the humanists, Luther charged, “It is not fitting one man should live in idleness on another’s labor . . .” (Grimm 1970:223). The task of assisting the poor, he argued, should be turned over to the civil authorities, and charity should be distributed only to the needy. Inspired in part by Luther’s critiques, a number of southern German cities passed comprehensive new poor laws (Armenordnungen) during the 1520s (Winckelmann 1914–1915). The goal of these laws was to channel relief to the “deserving” poor (those who, by reason of age or infirmity, could not help themselves) and deny it to the “undeserving” poor (those who, it was implied, were ca-
pable of working but consciously chose not to) (Gutton 1974; Jütte 1994).

In the Calvinist countries, welfare reform took a similar but somewhat more radical direction (Olson 1989). In these countries, too, efforts were made to centralize and rationalize the administration and distribution of poor relief and to channel aid to the “deserving” and deny it to the “undeserving.” But control over poor relief was vested, not in the local magistrates, but in the church deacons—lay officials responsible for the church’s ministry to the poor. The Calvinists also undertook a much more aggressive campaign to reform and reintegrate beggars and ne’er-do-wells in what Foucault (1972) aptly dubbed “the great confinement” (le grand renfermement). The central instrument in this ambitious program of reform and “confinement” was the “work-house,” or “house of correction.” The first work-house was established in London in 1555 on the premises of the old Bridewell Hospital, and over the next half-century, dozens of “Bridewells” were established throughout England (Innes 1987). A similar institution was established in the Netherlands in 1596: the Amsterdam Tuchthuis or “House of Discipline” (Sellin 1944). There, too, inmates were forced to perform heavy labor, subjected to an exacting routine, and exhorted to better themselves. During the early seventeenth century, Tuchthuizen were established throughout the Netherlands and, indeed, Europe as a whole (Schmidt 1960).

Early studies of poor relief generally drew a sharp line between Protestant and Catholic countries, arguing that the Protestant reforms failed to cross the confessional divide. Recent scholarship, however, has yielded a somewhat more nuanced picture. In his pioneering study of Renaissance Venice, for example, Pullan (1971) showed that efforts to rationalize and centralize the traditional system of poor relief in that city actually antedated the Reformation. In a well-known essay on poor relief in Lyon, Davis (1975:17–64) showed how a cross-confessional, humanist-led coalition was able to establish a rational and centralized system of public provision, the so-called Aumône Générale, during the 1530s, despite opposition from conservative Catholics (also see Gutton 1970). And Martz’s (1983) research on Toledo shows that serious efforts at welfare reform were also undertaken in sixteenth century Spain, albeit with considerably less success. Moreover, even in areas where the old institutions remained intact, new principles were often put in place. Thus, in Spain and Italy, many of the religious confraternities began to distinguish between the “shame-faced poor” (vergonzantes or vergognati)—local citizens who were poor through no fault of their own—and the “foreign beggars” and “vagabonds” who poured in from the countryside (Black 1989; Flynn 1989), thus drawing a line between “deserving” and “underserving” elements of the poor, much as the Protestants did. And in many areas, reformist bishops and magistrates also worked together to centralize and rationalize the existing system of “guesthouses” and “hospitals” and the private endowments that supported them. But although there were many similarities between Protestant and Catholic systems of poor relief, there was also one important difference: The Catholic systems were, or came to be, controlled by the Catholic Church.

Like the drive to reimpose ecclesiastical discipline, the campaign to rationalize poor relief involved a high degree of cooperation between the clergy and the laity. But the form that this cooperation took varied considerably across the confessions. In the Lutheran countries, control over poor relief ultimately fell to the local magistrates and the territorial princes. In the Calvinist countries, it generally (though not invariably) devolved to the church deacons and other lay officials, with the clergy and the magistrate playing a secondary role. In the Catholic countries, finally, it gradually (but not immediately) returned to the Church hierarchy, with lay confraternities playing an important but subordinate role, and local and territorial rulers exercising (at most) a supervisory function. The level of rationalization and centralization also varied across the confessions. Rationalization was clearly greatest in Calvinist countries and probably lowest in Catholic countries, while centralization was probably greatest in Lutheran countries and lowest in Calvinist countries. Once again, however, a general trend toward a de-differentiation of religious and secular roles and “functions” is seen.
The Political Dimension: Confessionalism, Citizenship, and Identity

The relationship between religious and temporal authority in the Middle Ages was often expressed through the metaphor of “the two swords.” Just where the line between the religious and temporal authorities should be drawn was, of course, a matter of considerable and heated controversy, particularly during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Tierney 1964). But there was no question that the two should be, and were, distinct. The Popes were to rule over the Church, and the princes were to rule over the state, and each had its own property, personnel, and politico-legal apparatus. When disputes arose, as they often did, they were to be adjudicated through direct negotiations.

During the Confessional Age, the lines between temporal and religious authority became increasingly blurred, both in principle and in fact. The increased authority of the state over the church was most evident in the Lutheran areas of Germany and Scandinavia, where the “national” churches were ruled directly by the territorial princes in their capacity as “emergency bishops” and the day-to-day administration of the church was placed in the hands of a “consistory” or “visitation committee,” a collegial body usually consisting of equal numbers of jurists and theologians (Müller 1930). These bodies drafted the church ordinances, appointed new pastors, conducted church visitations, and deliberated over questions of doctrine and ritual. The Lutheran Church, then, truly was a “state church.” It was also a “territorial church” in that it lacked any administrative organization above the territorial level.

In Reformed countries, the church retained a somewhat greater level of institutional autonomy and supraterritorial organization. Authority over church discipline, clerical appointments, church visitations, and theological and liturgical questions officially remained in the hands of ecclesiastical bodies—the consistories, classes, and synods—with the latter being (potentially) international bodies. In practice, however, the lines between church and state were not so tightly drawn. The members of the Calvinist consistories, for example, were usually drawn from the ranks of the political elite, sometimes exclusively so, as in Geneva (Kingdon 1990; Van Deursen 1991). In many cities, clerical appointments were also subject to the approval of the local magistrates, and it was not uncommon for representatives of the provincial or territorial government to sit in on or even vote at the church synods. For all these reasons, temporal rulers in the Calvinist countries were also able to exercise considerable influence over local churches and to resist efforts to establish a genuinely international network of Reformed Churches.

Not surprisingly, it was the Catholic Church that appears to have retained the greatest measure of independence during the Confessional Age. Indeed, one of the central goals of the Catholic Reformation was to reassert the authority that the Church had lost to the state. Nonetheless, the Roman Church, like its Protestant rivals, depended heavily on the protection and support of temporal rulers, and it, too, was forced to grant the state a considerable say in its affairs. This was particularly true in France and Spain, where the papacy was forced to grant the monarchs the power to nominate church officials and administer church benefices and to provide them with financial contributions (Mousnier 1974–1980; Wright 1991).

This intertwining of the religious and the political was not just structural and institutional; it was also cultural and ideological. In medieval Europe, religion had served as a unifying force that helped to bridge political divisions (Mann 1986, chap. 10). Because the territories of (Western and Central) Europe shared a common religion, an English prince could marry a Spanish bride, a monk from Leipzig could study in Padua, and a poor traveler from Lisbon could receive public alms in Antwerp. In Confessional Europe, by contrast, religion became a source of conflict that reinforced political divisions rather than bridging them. Christian universalism was supplanted by confessional particularism (Gordon 1996; Hanlon 1993).

The earliest and most obvious manifestation of confessional particularism was religious persecution. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed mass movements of religious refugees, a sort of confessionally
driven Völkerverdrängung in which Protestants drove out Catholics, Catholics drove out Protestants, and everybody drove out the Baptists and other "sectarians." The result of these movements was a gradual "unmixing of confessions," similar in its violence and brutality to the "unmixing of peoples" in present-day Europe and Africa (Brubaker 1996).

This unmixing of confessions was accompanied, and driven, by the politicization of religion. As Catholics and Protestants squared off against one another in the Schmalkaldean conflict, the French Wars of Religion, the Dutch Revolt and, finally, the Thirty Years' War, confession became a critical marker of political loyalty, and vice versa (Parker 1988, Pernot 1986; Schilling 1988). The consequence, in most cases, was political polarization, manifested in the formation of competing "religious parties" (e.g., the Huguenots and the Catholic League in France, the Patriots and the Malcontents in the Netherlands, the Covenanters in Scotland etc.) (Koenigsberger 1971:224-52) and in religious radicalization, that resulted in the violent persecution (or "voluntary" conversion) of political moderates (Woltjer 1976).

This alignment of political and confessional identity, in turn, helped forge a link between confessional allegiance and citizenship rights. During the second half of the sixteenth century, "religious mandates" (Religionsmandaten) requiring that political officials belong to the state church were passed in many European cities and towns, including Konstanz, Lyon, Münster, Strasbourg and Würzburg, to name only the better-documented cases (Abray 1985; Hsia 1984; Zimmermann 1994). Even in Amsterdam, widely known as a haven of dissent, posts in the city magistrate were effectively closed to non-Calvinists by the early seventeenth century (Israel 1995). Eventually, similar policies were enacted at the territorial level in France, Spain, England and many German principalities.

These policies, of course, affected only those eligible for political office—the elite. But the popular classes could not escape the pressures toward confessional conformity either. Trade guilds often required that their members belong to the state church, and religious and civic authorities discouraged or even refused to recognize interconfessional marriages or the dispensation of alms to religious dissenters. Nor was outward conformity sufficient. In many areas, individuals who absented themselves from church or refused to take the sacraments were subjected to legal action (Sabean 1984). Thus, in the Confessional Age, one's access to the public sphere, and even one's membership in the community, were largely dependent upon one's (professed) religious views—a de-differentiation of the religious and the secular.

**Beyond the Descending Image:**

*Church, State and Society in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*

Most versions of secularization theory rest on a descending image of Western religious development. They assume that the breakup of the Western Church diminished the authority and influence of religious elites and institutions. As we have seen, this interpretation is much too simplistic. To be sure, the Reformation did diminish the unity of religious authority—where there had previously been one church, now there were many. Did it therefore diminish the intensity of religious authority? Not necessarily. One could reasonably argue, and many early-modernists do argue, that the intensity of religious authority actually increased following the Reformation. This is because differentiation—the breakup of the Roman Church and the emergence of the great confessions—was accompanied by de-differentiation—tighter links between church and state and closer cooperation between clergy and laity.

Of course, the form and degree of de-differentiation varied from one context and one confession to the next. In part, these variations were a function of the particular time and place—the relative strength of church and state at a particular juncture or in a particular country. Generally, however, the degree of de-differentiation among church, state, and society was much greater in Protestant societies than in Catholic ones. In Catholic countries, the administrative hierarchy of the Roman church remained largely autonomous from the administrative hierarchy of the territorial states, and the clerical estate remained relatively independent of
the worldly estate. However much influence territorial rulers and social elites may have exerted over the institutions and personnel of the Church, they never attained, and rarely sought, complete or formal control over them. In the Protestant countries, by contrast, the church hierarchy and the clerical estate generally enjoyed a good deal less autonomy and independence from territorial rulers and social elites. But there were differences in the form that this subjugation took. In Lutheran countries, subjugation was direct: The church hierarchy became a branch of the royal administration. In Calvinist countries, it was indirect: The church was officially controlled by the consistory, and the consistories were effectively controlled by the local elites.

Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the overall tendency during the Confessional Age was toward territorial-level de-differentiation and that the descending image is a poor description of the socio-structural transformation induced by the Reformation. In fact, if secularization is defined as the differentiation of religious and nonreligious roles and institutions, the centuries after the Reformation can actually be seen as an era of radical de-secularization.

This raises an important question: If the Reformation led to de-differentiation, how are we to explain the re-differentiation that followed? Obviously, I cannot provide any definitive answers in this context, but I can suggest some tentative hypotheses. The first is that re-differentiation was caused by de-differentiation. This is because the de-differentiation of religious and secular elites and institutions generated severe tensions and conflicts between clerics and rulers and between church and state—jurisdictional and ideological battles regarding control over discipline, education, social welfare, and many other things. These battles ultimately led to the formation of deeper and more clearly drawn boundaries between the religious and secular. The second hypothesis is that re-differentiation was caused by rationalization. One of the hallmarks of the Reformations, both Protestant and Catholic, was the attempt to align religious practices more closely with religious principles. Of course, the sources of these principles were different. Among Protestants, the text of the Bible was paramount; among Catholics, the teachings of the Church were the final authority. But whatever the source, the principles of the churches inevitably conflicted with the principles underlying other “value spheres” (political, economic, aesthetic and so on) and the attempts of church leaders to impose them on society met with varying degrees of resistance—from monarchs inspired by raison d’état, from merchants who traded with heretics and infidels, from artists who appropriated religious imagery, and so on. The result, once again, was a sharpening of boundaries among the different spheres, the values that underlay them, and the groups that “carried” them. Of course, these two hypotheses need not be mutually exclusive; in fact, they could be seen as complementary. Nor can it be assumed that the causes of re-differentiation are confined to the Confessional Age. Just what the causes were and how they were related is something that can only be determined through further research.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:
TOWARD A DIALECTICAL MODEL OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

The principal aim of my essay has been to draw out some of the empirical shortcomings of the “new” and “old” paradigms in the sociology of religion by means of a historical critique of the “ascending” and “descending” images that underlie them. Thus, I have tried to show that the effect of the Reformation was not so much to Christianize the populace as to rationalize religion, pace the ascending image. I have also tried to show that the Reformation resulted not in a heightened differentiation of the religious and nonreligious spheres, but rather in a dramatic de-differentiation of church, state, and society, that is, to a process of de-secularization, the exact inverse of the descending image.

This does not mean that the old and new paradigms are “false,” but it does expose some of their conceptual and theoretical
limitations. Consider the term “religious vitality.” Advocates of the new paradigm have defined it in terms of religious participation, as measured through levels of church membership and church attendance, and subjective belief, as measured by individuals responses to survey questions. These indicators have a certain validity in a modern setting, but can they be transposed to the premodern context? To a setting in which church membership was universal and church attendance was compulsory? To a time when religion was more ritual than intellectual and more collective than individual? Clearly, one would need a broader and more contextualized understanding of religious vitality if one wished to make meaningful comparisons across these various eras, an understanding that takes account of the changing character of religion itself. In studying the European Middle Ages, for example, it might be more appropriate to focus on the rate at which new religious institutions were founded (e.g., monastic orders, lay confraternities, civic charities, etc.), or the rate at which new religious practices were diffused (e.g., pilgrimages, devotions, processions). These would probably be more reliable indicators of religious vitality in that context.

There is another problem as well. In the new paradigm, “religious vitality” is determined by “market structure.” But what determines “market structure”? Why are some “religious markets” freer than others? Advocates of the new paradigm have not really begun to address these questions. What is needed here, I suggest, is a sort of comparative political economy of the religious sphere that attempts to classify the various types of religious economies and seeks to understand the factors that produce and sustain them.

Thus far, I have focused my criticisms on the new paradigm. But the “old paradigm” is not without its problems. Take the term “differentiation,” for example. As we have seen, the Reformation was not just a process of religious differentiation; it also involved social de-differentiation. Differentiation within the religious sphere proper was accompanied by de-differentiation among the religious, social and political spheres. Instead of thinking about the Reformation as a combined process of differentiation and de-differentiation, it might be more fruitful to conceptualize it as a process of structural reconfiguration in which the existing relationships among religious, social, and political values, elites and institutions were shattered and rearranged in a new pattern.

There are also theoretical problems with the old paradigm. Most versions of secularization theory assume that an increase in the level of social differentiation leads to a decline in individual religiosity. This argument is open to criticism on several fronts. First, it is overstated, for while it is probably true that the influence of religious values and institutions tends to become less pervasive as the level of social differentiation increases, there is certainly no reason to assume, ipso facto, that it becomes weaker. After all, the influence of religion could be increasing in one area (e.g., sexual morality) even as it is decreasing in another (e.g., foreign policy). Thus, a decrease in the scope of religious authority could be coupled with an increase in the intensity of religious regulation. Besides being overstated, the secularization argument is also underdeveloped. As we saw earlier, all versions of secularization theory rest on a common premise: that differentiation promotes secularization and, more specifically, that the differentiation of religious and non-religious values and institutions increases the scope of secular values and institutions. Secularization is thus a function of differentiation. But what is differentiation a function of? In the older versions of secularization theory, differentiation is usually explained in functionalist terms as the result of a natural or evolutionary tendency toward greater complexity and rationality inherent to all social systems—a form of explanation that few contemporary sociologists would regard as valid. In some of the newer versions of secularization theory, differentiation is usually explained in functionalist terms as the result of a natural or evolutionary tendency toward greater complexity and rationality inherent to all social systems—a form of explanation that few contemporary sociologists would regard as valid. In some of the newer versions of secularization theory, on the other hand, the language and metaphors of differentiation are retained, but underlying mechanisms that could explain it are rarely adduced, which is clearly an untenable position. Thus, what is needed here is an account of the micro-level mechanisms that affect macro-level (de-)differentiation.

Based on the foregoing critique, I argue that any “general,” or even “middle-range,” theory of religious change must do at least three things: First, it should explain how and
why religious and nonreligious values and institutions become more (or less) differentiated over time; second, it should explain historical changes in the character and degree of religiosity within particular societies or civilizations; finally it should explain how these two processes are related. In sum, it should be able to explain religious change at both the societal and experiential levels, and it should be able to relate these two levels of change.

Obviously, I cannot elaborate such a theory here, but I can suggest some possible starting points that I regard as particularly promising. The first is Weber’s ([1920] 1946) well-known essay on “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions.” In that essay, Weber explores the emergence of the seven “value-spheres” (i.e., religious, social, economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, and intellectual/scientific) that he takes to be constitutive of modern, Western societies, and he outlines the types of “tensions” that “typically” arise between the religious and the nonreligious spheres (e.g., universal love versus communal loyalty, religious brotherliness versus economic self-interest, the Sermon on the Mount versus raison d’État, etc.). The origins of these tensions, he argues, lie in the “prophetic and salvation religions” (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), for it was in these religions, he contends, that a fundamental split first emerged between the worldly and otherworldly, the secular and the religious, the particular and the universal. Once these tensions emerge, says Weber, there is a general tendency for them to become more and more acute, because the differentiation of the religious and nonreligious spheres allows the values and practices specific to each sphere (its particular “rationality”) to be worked out with greater clarity and consistency (Konsequenz), that in turn increases the degree of conflict and tension between those “rationalities,” thus promoting further differentiation. In Weber’s schema, then, differentiation breeds rationalization, and rationalization breeds further differentiation.

Weber’s framework meets the basic criteria for an improved theory of religious change: It explains changes in the relationship between the religious and nonreligious spheres; it explains changes in the character of religiosity; and it suggests how the changes are related. Still, it has its limitations. Take, for example, the claim that rationalization breeds differentiation. Perhaps this is true in the long run, but it is not always true in the short run. In the Reformation, for example, rationalization seems to have been associated with de-differentiation. A similar point could be made about the other half of Weber’s theory, the claim that differentiation breeds rationalization. It seems fair to say that the religious and nonreligious spheres are more fully differentiated in the modern West than they were in the premodern West. But is religion really more rationalized? Naturally, the answer one gives to that question will depend upon how one defines “religion” and “rationality,” but one can easily imagine reasons for answering it in the negative (e.g., magic, astrology, the New Age, and various Christian and non-Christian syncretisms). And even if one did answer in the affirmative, it could still be argued that there have been other, more important changes in the character of religiosity that are not fully captured by the term “rationalization.” Thus, as a theory of secularization, Weber’s analysis remains somewhat underdeveloped in at least two respects: It does not adequately specify the causal processes and mechanisms that underlie social and cultural (de-)differentiation; and it conceptualizes religious change too narrowly, as a process of rationalization.

Sociologists have already sought to address these deficiencies. Drawing on recent work in differentiation theory (Alexander and Colon 1985; Luhmann 1984, 1987), for example, Chaves (1994) argues that secularization should be defined not as “declining religion but as the declining scope of religious authority” (p. 750). For Chaves, secularization, and differentiation more generally, are not “master trends” rooted in some quasi-evolutionary tendency but historical processes rooted in concrete social struggle. “Secularization occurs, or not, as the result of social and political conflicts between those social actors who would enhance or maintain religion’s social significance and those who would reduce it” (Chaves 1994:752). But what impact does a decline in the scope of religious authority have on the structure of religious experience? In a re-
cent essay, Luckmann (1990) points to two interrelated effects. The first is “privatization.” As the level of social differentiation and complexity rises, argues Luckmann, it becomes increasingly difficult to “maintain the social universality” of a particular religious worldview (1990:132). Religion becomes a matter of personal preference. Individual “consumers” fashion their personal worldviews out of the spiritual raw materials available in the contemporary religious marketplace.

The second effect is “shrinking transcendence.” As religious worldviews become more diverse, reasons Luckmann, the “great transcендences” embodied in the collective rituals of the salvation religions become less frequent. Their place is then taken by the “little transcенdences” experienced by the individual in the course of everyday life. But the decline of the great transcенdences should not be equated with a decline of religion per se (unless the salvation religions are regarded as the only true religions). Indeed, says Luckmann, “shrinking transcendence” can actually go together with “expanding religion” as new “firms” enter the religious market.

The works of Weber, Chaves, and Luckmann all suggest a via media between the impasse of the old and new paradigms. If secularization is conceived in structural terms, as a process of social differentiation, and if religious vitality is seen in a fully contextualized way, it need not be assumed that secularization leads to religious decline. From this perspective, there is no longer any reason to assume that increasing levels of social differentiation will automatically lead to decreasing levels of individual religiosity. In fact, the very opposite may be true: The intensity of (individual) religious experience could increase even as the (structural) scope of religious institutions declines. Nor is there any reason to assume that increasing levels of religious participation necessarily reflect a decreasing level of secularization. One can easily imagine a situation in which private religious practice flourishes, even as public religious institutions flounder. In brief, then, secularization and religious vitality need not be opposed to one another. Whether they are is an empirical—and historical—question.

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