

THE REASONABLENESS OF FAITH AND THE IRRATIONALITY OF “REASON”

Gerald J. Russello

The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious Than Ever

By Rodney Stark

(Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2015)

Taking Rites Seriously: Law, Politics, and the Reasonableness of Faith

By Francis J. Beckwith

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

President Obama’s now-infamous comment about people clinging to their “guns and religion” betrayed a glimpse of a worldview increasingly common among Western elites. People must “cling” to religion because there is no rational reason to believe; it is more like the “irritable mental gestures” Lionel Trilling famously described as conservatism in his book *The Liberal Imagination*. Faith is the losing side of a centuries-old struggle against superstition in favor of science or “reason.” Sociological evidence has appeared to give this worldview a patina of reality. In the United States especially, recent years have witnessed the emergence of the so-called nones, those who profess, or claim to profess, no religion. A

group of writers dubbed the New Atheists made a name for themselves through a series of books arguing that theism is irrational. And pundits and law professors have questioned why religious liberty should have any special protections such as that accorded it in the First Amendment.

But what if these accounts do not tell the whole picture, indeed are false? In fact, the available data refutes those who believe religion is fading. Those who so cavalierly proclaim the coming end of religion presume crucial parts of the narrative that a look at statistics simply does not support. Religious belief is in fact increasing in the world, not decreasing, and religious motivations and understandings are central for an

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overwhelming majority of the world's population. Even in the United States, religious belief is holding steady, and many of those "nones" in fact are believers, just not members of any organized religion. As Rodney Stark notes in *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious Than Ever*, "In every nook and cranny left by organized faiths, all manner of unconventional and unchurched supernaturalisms are booming"; significant percentages of persons in ostensibly secularized countries such as Russia and France believe in occult practices like astrology or fortune telling (1). And of course there are countries challenging secularism entirely, such as Iran after the fall of the Shah and more recently Turkey. Conversely, the percentage of committed atheists remains low, typically less than 5 percent of those polled.

Drawing on data across a number of countries, including the worldwide set of one million interviews conducted as part of the Gallup World Poll, Stark concludes simply that "a massive religious awakening is taking place around the world" (2). The wonder is that a contrary opinion has survived for so long. As far back as 1967, sociologist Peter L. Berger, in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, described what is known as the "secularization thesis." This is the theory that, as societies modernize, they necessarily secularize, with secularization in this context meaning not only that people lose their historic faith but also that such faith becomes less publicly accepted as a reason for action. Berger, although at the time sympathetic to the thesis (he has since changed his view somewhat), found that rather than simply secularize, societies pluralize. Religious traditions multiply in modern societies but do not necessarily diminish. What increases is the individual responsibility to choose one of those traditions, or none. This anticipates Charles Taylor's argument for

the unencumbered self: we may be religious ourselves, but we recognize that we live in a world of multiple choices reflecting different worldviews that must coexist.

More recently, scholars such as José Casanova and others have asserted that beginning in the 1980s, with the fall of the Shah in Iran, the rise of the religious "Moral Majority" in the United States, and the role of the papacy in ending (atheistic) Soviet Communism, a new period of "deprivatization" began, by which he means "the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them."¹ Rather, as with Berger, several things are happening at once under the rubric of secularism. The stability or even growth of religion is not inconsistent with a legitimate "secular" public space that may be informed at least partially by religious beliefs.²

Stark complicates this picture even further, not just with a counternarrative, but one also buttressed by extensive data and research worldwide. It turns out that religious faith is not eroding. Stark, a professor at Baylor University and the codirector of its Institute for Studies of Religion, has written a number of books designed to explode common myths, academic or otherwise. His other recent book is an exploration of anti-Catholic falsehoods still circulating as popular stories but that scholarship has demonstrated to be untrue. Stark has a similar aim with *Triumph of Faith*—to dispel the popular myths that the world is losing religious belief altogether in the face of something called secularism.

The bulk of the book is made up of a tour of sorts through the religions of the world. Stark gathers data to show that rather than shrinking, faith of all kinds is growing. There are, for example, more Christians in

sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world. Hinduism is seeing a resurgence. Even traditional Asian faiths remain strong, despite decades of officially Communist ideology in China, for example. These faiths are harder for Western observers to see, since such religions as Buddhism in China and elsewhere in Asia and Shintoism in Japan are not congregational, "churched" structures. The trend has become so obvious that even the mainstream press (though not, as we shall see, many academics) is beginning to notice. The *Washington Post* recently concluded that "while rising numbers of 'nones'—those who claim no religious affiliation when asked—claim the attention of religious pundits, the world tells a different story."³ The article goes on to suggest that in China, for example, there are more Christians at worship each Sunday than in the United States. The number of nonees or the even smaller number of atheists receives outsized attention that obscures what is really happening.

Further, Islam is stronger than it has been in centuries, and Stark sets out data from such sources as the Muslims who make the required Hajj to Mecca. That number has skyrocketed since the 1970s in a development Western observers failed to anticipate, since they were in the grip of a secularization view that could not appreciate the significance of the growth of militant forms of Islam over the past half century. Stark explodes the comforting theories of Western elites by citing responses from people in Muslim countries themselves. "This revival is often described as a return to medieval ideals and practices" such as honor killings and oppression of women, writes Stark. But in fact

there is nothing medieval about any of this. Although a central aspect of the Muslim revival involves a call for return to imaginary "good old days,"

that revival is occurring among people who are essentially modern and urban. . . . Survey data give the lie to the claim that the Muslim revival is occurring overwhelmingly among the poor and uneducated. . . . Weekly mosque attendance is not unique to the lower class. (89)

Indeed, although Stark does not make this point here, the term "medieval" reveals more about the prejudices of the Western observers than it does about what is actually happening among the Muslim faithful.

The term reflects a distorted view of what the Middle Ages was, and therefore contributes to a misunderstanding of what is occurring today. Anti-colonialism and revulsion against modern Western culture are playing significant roles in turning Muslims back to their faith, especially those living in the West. However, the research Stark cites about the economic circumstances of the revival is especially pertinent, and one Western leaders should understand more fully. Even Pope Francis, in responding to the recent murder of a French priest in his own church, referred to economic circumstances rather than religious ones in fomenting the violence there and across Europe. Stark, reporting these statistics, would disagree. To discount what people actually say they believe is to do a disservice to the power of their reason to understand their circumstances. Conversely, simply attributing stated religious belief to some other causes reduces the ability to understand and engage in true dialogue with others.

One point Stark does not really address is whether these various religious revivals can resist the secularization of elite discourse in the West. That is to say, there is a difference between committed Christians bearing into the public square a two-millennia tradition

of reflection on political power, and a collection of unchurched nones who have vague spiritual feelings but no such tradition. In modern Western countries, for example, as the public presence of Christianity withers, recently devised religions, such as those following the ways of *Star Wars*—inspired Jedi Knights or the cobbled together Wicca, have taken its place. The liberal website *Salon*, for example, has called this phenomenon “Mysticore,” and notes that “mysticism, witchcraft and magic are stepping in” and becoming mainstream.⁵ Unlike the major world religions, these sects are largely politically quiescent. They generally pose no challenge to the narrative of secularism, since they are not developed enough to have an institutional presence as an alternative to the secular power (there are no Jedi martyrs, for example—except, of course, in the movies).

Indeed, their existence in a sense justifies secularism’s disdain for religious thought, because these new religions themselves often simply echo secular premises or are not philosophical. Read carefully, that is what Stark’s chapter on Europe demonstrates; conventional church attendance, much less militant Christianity, is not the way the religious revival is occurring there; rather, “church attendance may be low in Europe, but unconventional supernaturalism is thriving.” Whether that will be enough to sustain Europe in the face of a dominant secularism and an exploding Islam awaits Stark’s next book.

Casanova, in reviewing a number of country case studies, such as Poland and Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s, concludes that one might look at the secularization thesis not as a theoretical critique of the weakness of religion but as a “political program” meant to bring about the very

state of a society without a religion, which the theory posits as inevitable.⁴ In Francis Beckwith’s technical yet approachable new book, *Taking Rites Seriously: Law, Politics, and the Reasonableness of Faith*, he tackles the contemporary exponents of such a program. Many elite American legal circles, innocent of most theological, philosophical, or historical research, simply deem religion to be “irrational” and unsuitable for a place in public discourse. Accordingly, any political position that can be traced back to a religious “belief” must be declared out of bounds in a pluralistic and democratic polity. Of course, this position privileges the secular lawyers themselves, who can decide in what “public reason” consists, and what positions are acceptable according to the canons of that public reason.

Beckwith, like Stark a professor at Baylor University, argues for the reasonableness of religious belief against those proponents of a narrowed public reason. The book is divided into three main parts. The first part addresses whether religious motives are legitimate bases for action in the public square. The second section, “Dignity and Personhood,” develops an argument in defense of human dignity against the views of certain philosophers and others who argue that dignity is not a characteristic that inheres in the human person from conception. Finally, Beckwith addresses what he calls “justificatory liberalism” regarding two arguments: the one over “intelligent design” and the one over same-sex marriage.

In the initial essay, “Faith Seeking Understanding,” Beckwith critiques the

claim made by certain jurists and a growing number of legal scholars that religious belief is irrational. This understanding of religion has implications for how we think about the pub-

lic participation of religious citizens as well as how courts may assess policies and laws that are tightly tethered to religious traditions. If religious beliefs are irrational, not only do these beliefs have no intellectual content, it does not seem far fetched to suggest that those who embrace and are motivated by those beliefs, religious citizens, could be justly excluded from the public square. (5–6)

This idea that religious beliefs are “irrational” dovetails with the secularization thesis, which assumes that as knowledge (understood as measurable, scientific knowledge) grows, religious belief must decrease.

One version of this perspective can be found in John Rawls. In books such as *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, Rawls argues that people are often governed by what he calls “comprehensive doctrines.” These comprehensive doctrines can be religious in nature, and simply because they are religious does not make them unreasonable. Others, however, have rejected this more modest approach to put forward the view that religion qua religion can never be reasonable. Even Rawls thought that, although perhaps reasonable, a comprehensive doctrine based on religious belief could not really be the basis on “which the government may be justified in coercing its citizens.” As a practical matter, therefore, there may be little ultimate difference between these views. Liberal philosophers have given cover for the belief that liberal secularism simply *is* the same as rationality.

But as Beckwith explains, this is an idiosyncratic way to understand “faith,” since “that is not what religious believers understand as faith. In the Christian tradition, for example, even though ‘faith’ is one of the three infused theological virtues, that

same tradition for nearly two millennia has produced numerous sophisticated and careful works... on the complementarity of faith and reason.” That is, simply because Christians (and others) invoke “faith” in support of certain of their beliefs (in the Trinity, for example), which may not be accessible through human reason, that does not mean that other beliefs, such as the dignity of the human person and the existence of a common good beyond individual desires, are not also acceptable to others who do not share that faith.

What about that second point, that religious citizens can be excluded from the public square because of their religious views? That is not so far-fetched. The Obama administration has waged a war to force groups ranging from orders of nuns to private businesses to violate their religious beliefs in the name of access to contraceptives. Other states have forced Catholic adoption agencies out of business for failing to heed the secular rationalism (SR) position on same-sex marriage. Further, Mark Tushnet, long a law professor at a Catholic university and now at Harvard, has argued that Christians need to be treated like Nazis and essentially cordoned off from public life because they have “lost” the culture wars. Such arguments meet with a yawn, if not covert approval, from other elites. In fact, Beckwith goes on to demonstrate that SR is itself irrational by its own terms. For example, SR asserts that reason “denies” incontestable truths; but of course, for SR that *is* an incontestable truth, thus making the theory self-refuting. Further, as a factual matter, Beckwith demonstrates that SR holds that what makes “religious” claims irrational is that they are not subject to proof. But proponents of this perspective must ignore the substantial body of philosophic and other work devoted to trying to prove theistic claims.

Further, resort to the argument that such religious claims are not subject to scientific proof is a category mistake; “the quantifiable and measurable insights delivered by those sciences have very little to do with answering the metaphysical questions that philosophies like Thomism are attempting to answer” (31). And indeed, when Beckwith addresses issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, he explains that the real core of the argument is between different philosophies, not between advocates of “reason” and advocates of irrationality. Thus, Beckwith turns a standard argument for same-sex marriage on its head. He carefully picks apart the arguments for the legal recognition of same-sex marriage and concludes that—as has in fact occurred—such recognition ultimately must result in use of government force against dissenters. But this is precisely what the theoretical support for same-sex marriage is supposed to prohibit; that is, what Beckwith calls “justificatory liberalism” prohibits imposition of coercion based on reasons the persons coerced conclude are a violation of their own reasonably held beliefs.

If Stark is right about the rise and permanence of religious belief, then the West is looking forward to a period of intense and multilayered engagement with religion in areas of the world that have not experienced the West’s secularism phase. Moreover, that same religious revival is occurring within the West itself, despite willful blindness by elites. This neglect of the sociological facts

that Stark outlines is a shame, because the West contains within itself traditions of pluralism and a “secular” public square, dating from Pope Gelasius’s invocation of the “two swords.” That is, religious and civil political authorities are separate but equally valid. There can be modes of political discourse that recognize a place for arguments derived perhaps from religious premises but that are also convincing to nonreligious citizens and that do not allow for unjust coercion. A great deal of strife could be avoided by returning to this tradition, rather than to a substantive secularism that by definition excludes religious claims.

Regrettably, Stark and Beckwith reveal that academic and political elites are unsuited for the challenge ahead. As Stark shows, they are still captivated by a narrative of secularism that to the extent it is true affects an infinitesimal part of the world population. Beckwith shows that the narrow secular rationalism elites have developed (based in part on the false secularization narrative) is incoherent on its own premises and wholly unable to account for a truly multireligious polity. Indeed, what these books demonstrate is that these adversaries of faith are themselves in the grip of a faith. As Stark says, “Secularists have been predicting the imminent demise of religions for centuries. They have always been wrong—and their claims today are no different. It is their unshakable faith in secularization that may be the most ‘irrational’ of all beliefs” (212). †

1 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

2 Ibid., 38.

3 Wes Granberg-Michaelson, “Think Christianity Is Dying? No, Christianity Is Shifting Dramatically,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/?utm_campaign=buffer&utm_content=buffer2b989&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com.

4 Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 214.

5 Laura Bolt, “Mysticore Is the New Norm: Inside the Trend That’s Casting Its Spell Over the Culture,” *Salon*, August 22, 2016, <http://www.salon.com/2016/08/23/mysticore-is-the-new-norm-inside-the-trend-thats-casting-its-spell-over-the-culture/>.