

What does it mean for religion to be “important”?

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First, thank you to the organizers of this conference for putting together such a timely and significant event. We need more forums where we can think together about what “our common future” might look like and what we want it to look like. And second, thank you to Professor Norris for such a rich and stimulating contribution, which adds further support to her debate-setting book, *Sacred and Secular*, written with Ronald Inglehart. I do not think that it is an exaggeration to say that that book has to be the starting point for anybody seriously interested in understanding the global condition and fate of religion.

It has to be the starting point because the evidence it offers, now further buttressed with new data and analyses from the 2007 Gallup World poll, is, simply put, overwhelming. Where people live with lower levels of personal security – with existential insecurity, Norris calls it – there tends to be much higher proportions of the population who hold religious beliefs, profess religious values, and regularly attend religious services. More materially secure places, with people who make living securely a lower personal priority, have, relatively speaking, lower numbers of religious people. These are, we could say in the mode of Emile Durkheim, social facts. Full stop.

Facts, however, do not interpret themselves. And it is here where I think we can begin to raise some critical questions. One simple question has to do with how we specify the question of “feeling insecure.” One of the important advances of the present paper over *Sacred and Secular* is that Norris now includes analysis of survey questions designed to probe subjective attitudes towards security, rather than relying only on objective conditions like mortality rates, health, education, and so on. But this still does not really get at potential differences in *types* of subjective experience of insecurity. Is there a difference between, on the one hand, wanting to escape a war torn, disease ridden country and, on the other, feeling trapped, with nowhere to escape to, in a world threatened by global nuclear war and international terrorism – a type of feeling one would expect to be more prevalent in advanced industrial countries, recently given much attention in the work of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck? It seems unlikely that the Gallup poll question about the

general importance of living in secure surroundings and wanting to avoid anything dangerous will capture this difference in types of subjective experience of insecurity. And therefore we can't really ask whether all feelings of insecurity lead to higher level of religiosity, or only certain types do.

This, however, is a relatively small point. To my mind, the most crucial interpretative issue concerns the question of what it means to say, as Norris does, that religion is more or less "important," "salient," or "emphasized," in different publics. Is religion only important when, as among highly impoverished people, over 90% of the population is religious? Or does it (or maybe can it) be important, though perhaps in different ways, among people for whom "the basic necessities of life" have been met, where, even according to her own methods and analysis, nevertheless 6 out of 10 people profess religious values?

I think the answer is probably "yes." But to give any answer at all, we need to go beyond the generic statement that religion may be more or less "important" based on how large the religious population is and ask instead "important for *what*"? Important politically? Important socially? Important personally? Well, let's think about each of these in turn.

Is religion important for politics in post-industrial countries? Fewer people, we know, are actively and regularly concerned with religion in industrial and post-industrial countries, relative to pre-industrial countries. Does that mean that religion is less important politically in those countries with relatively fewer, on a global scale, religious people? I think the evidence points toward "no."

Here I would point primarily to the recent work by the statistician Andrew Gelman and his colleagues. In their book *Red State Blue State, Rich State Poor State*, they find evidence of a strong link between levels of regular church attendance and voting patterns: more attendance is typically linked with voting for the more conservative party. This linkage, they show, has dramatically increased in recent years – since the 1980's, church attendance has become a more powerful predictor of party voting than income level as the major parties have become more ideologically divided around social and cultural issues than on classic left-right class issues. Significantly, this correlation is strongest among people with the highest incomes, who are also the people we'd expect to be the most existentially secure. In other words, among rich Americans, knowing whether or not somebody is religious tells you a lot about their political proclivities, whereas among poor Americans, it tells you less. Moreover, this connection is not only present in the U.S. Gelman and his collaborators analyzed thirty countries, and found that, on average, regular church attenders tend to vote for conservative parties and that the difference in conservative voting between attenders and non-attenders is greatest at the upper income levels.

Gelman concludes by suggesting that we are seeing what he calls a "post-industrial" politics, in which supporters of liberal and conservative parties differ more on

religion than on income, and politics “feels more like a culture war than a class war.” In other words, even, and maybe especially, in post-industrial societies where fewer total people are high church attenders, religious participation is a very important marker of political identity. It is not simply a cover for class war between the insecure poor and the secure rich, but is in fact even more salient among the rich. Nor should we, I think, chalk this up to a story in which the few remaining religious people hang on to their “traditional values” against the tide of secularism – insofar, for example, as the U.S. connection between conservative voting and high church attendance is driven by insurgent evangelical and charismatic Christianity, this is not a case of “traditional” religion beating back modernity but an example of a highly modern, individualistic form of Christianity asserting itself politically. Pentecostalism was, after all, founded in Los Angeles!

So religious practice in post-industrial societies, despite its decline relative to the rest of the world, remains important for politics in post-industrial societies, and it does not seem to be going away any time soon. How about the social importance of religion? Let me just say something very briefly about that, by referring to the work of the British sociologist Grace Davie. One of the key concepts she has developed is the notion of “vicarious religion.” This is the idea that for non-religious people it is often very important that *some* form of active religious practice continue to exist. For such people, even if they themselves are not believers, the world, they think, would be an impoverished place if religion were to die out; their societies would be missing important voices and perspectives, important aspects of their heritage, and important opportunities for personal growth and social support especially at crucial moments in the life course, such as birth, marriage, and death. So “vicariously religious” people tend to support measures that keep religious institutions and practices afloat in virtue of the social significance of religion, even where low numbers of people are actively religious. This type of social importance of religion – vicarious religion – is strongest in certain parts of Europe, Davies suggests, where the church often functions as a kind of standing public resource, not always used, but held ready for when it might be needed.

How about the personal importance of religion? What does it mean to say that religion is less important personally where lower shares of the population actively attend services, profess religious values, and believe in God (again, relative to the global population)? First, I do not see any reason to say that the faith of believers in post-industrial countries should be any weaker than anybody else’s faith just because many of their neighbors are not believers (and let us recall that there still are many religious people who live highly secure lives in post-industrial countries, as Norris’ data shows in Figure 6, the mean score on the “importance of God scale” is still above 7.5 out of ten, even for people who do not say “living securely” is very important to them).

But the type of religiosity might well change. It might become more intense, maybe moving toward that intense, personal, ecstatic, and hard form of experience characteristic of evangelical, charismatic, and pentecostalist movements – which, we

should not forget, is a modern phenomenon. But it might also take on many of the qualities analyzed by Charles Taylor in his recent book, *A Secular Age* – there, Taylor’s main point, if it is possible to extract a main point out of such a massive and sprawling book, is that the condition of being religious in a secular age is different from being religious in a world where being religious is the norm. It is different because it is experienced as a contingent option that requires sustained personal commitment and is always set against a host of alternatives, such as art, science, new age spiritualities, nature, and more. We can add to this the work of Norris’ collaborator, Ronald Inglehart, who has persistently found that individuals in post-industrial societies espouse “post-materialist” values that center on personal expression. Many religions have sought to adapt themselves to this change by highlighting the more expressive aspects of their traditions and practices. One major survey of religious institutions in America, for instance, found that in the past decades the single biggest trend among all denominations was: more drumming during services! So religion seems to me to be likely to retain significant levels of personal importance, even where existential security is high.

Let me close by referring to one more way in which we could think about the “importance” of religion. I am referring to its importance for our common future, the theme of our conference. What kind of future can we expect religions to have? Of course, social science is not a very good fortuneteller. But our models have implicit visions of the future and it is worth reflecting on what kind of a picture they paint.

What kind of a future for religion does the model of religion as a salve for existential insecurity give us? To me, it looks like this: we cannot say unilaterally whether, speaking globally, religion will grow or disappear. It will likely grow where life remains nasty, brutish, and short, since people who live under those conditions are likely to be more religious and to have more babies. It will likely decrease where life is secure, stable, and comfortable, since those people are less religious and have fewer babies. Overall, the global population of religious people could, therefore, rise, but still continue to decline in that segment of the world that has modernized. So even if it is not the case that the world as a whole is secularizing, it *is* the case that modernization leads to secularization, and *if* the whole world modernized, then the whole world would secularize.

This, it seems to me, is a relatively impoverished view of the future of religion. This is because it seems to suggest that, unless something gets in the way, religion should, under modern, secure conditions, eventually decline to zero. If we succeed in the modern project of making our lives secure and comfortable, then we will also succeed in getting rid of religion, at least in any other than a merely residual form of emptied out rituals devoid of living significance.

Now, I don’t think this is an impoverished picture out of any great personal commitment to traditional religion – I’m a Jew of the North American reformed variety, which means I go to synagogue once a month and spend lots of my time

there singing 1960's folk songs and doing meditative chanting. My point is that I don't think that this picture can do justice to the full range of religiosity that does not seem to be a function of one's level of existential security. *Granted* that much in religion is a response to life's fragility and uncertainty, but much is not, and we would do well to wonder what else there is if we want to understand what is likely to thrive in our increasingly materially secure societies. In fact, we can see this persistence of religion in Norris' own data: as I've noted, 6 out of 10 people who have low lived poverty rates hold religious values, and people for whom living securely is not a prime concern *still* on average say that God has a more than moderate importance in their lives. Moreover, there have been increases in "levels of religiosity" as shown in Figure 7 in W. Germany, U.S.A., Canada, Britain, France, Finland, Japan, Portugal, and Italy.

This to my mind raises first and foremost a theoretical question: we need to create a richer typology of the sources of religiosity that includes sources not rooted in existential insecurity and then we can investigate how important these types are, politically, socially, personally. Without going into detail, let me just name three. First, there is religion as a mode of personal expression. I already mentioned this above in connection with the work of Ronald Inghelhart, but one could also mention Talcott Parsons and Robert Bellah's idea of the "expressive revolution" in religion that started in the 1960's and continues to this day. Second, one could also mention various forms of non-transcendent, immanent religiosity. In the west, this form of religiosity has been prevalent among the various forms of "spirituality" that often draw freely from Eastern cultures and are often joined with artistic and healing practices. The sociologists Courtney Bender and Paul Heelas have done significant work on the vibrancy of this sort of religiosity in, respectively, Boston and the U.K. Third, one could mention what I would call "tragic religion." This is religious experience that does not propose an escape from life's problems or affirm the feeling that "things will work out." Rather, it heightens the feeling of vulnerability. There are strong strands of this kind of attitude especially in European high culture, where criticism, rather than celebration, of "bourgeois comfort" is the norm. The theologian Paul Tillich formulated a distinctively Christian form of this kind of religiosity, but it has been attractive to European intellectuals too.

We can get into the specifics of these in discussion, but the theoretical point is a general one: as they are not born in fear, we would not expect them to disappear with fear, and in fact, they might rise. This sort of proposal seems to me to be more consistent with Norris' data, which to my eyes show a leveling out rather than a linear decline, and a relatively rather than absolutely smaller number of religious people in post-industrial and industrial societies vs. agrarian societies. Less, that is, is not none, and to understand the place of religion in our common future, we need to move on from asking in a generic way whether "religion" is rising or falling or is higher or lower globally (with lower meaning trending toward insignificance). Instead we need to ask how whatever forms of religiosity are likely to remain with us are likely to play important roles in our political, social, and personal existences.