

The God Gap

Why Europeans Lose Faith and Americans Keep Praying

Josef Joffe

Few differences between Europe and the United States have proven as enduring as the “religion gap.” Almost 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*: “On my arrival, the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention.” And then he noticed something more astounding: “In France I had . . . seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and they reigned in common over the same country.”¹

With these observations, Tocqueville sounded two key themes of American exceptionalism. One was the country’s extraordinary religiosity; the other was religion’s startling contribution to freedom. By contrast, the faith-freedom nexus has been weak throughout European history. Indeed, in its worst moments, the church was the enemy of freedom. The Catholic Church,

a rigid hierarchy, preached not liberty but authority and obedience. When challenged as in the Reformation, it fought back brutally, as the Counter-Reformation and the Inquisition showed. Calvinism, though inspired by equality and individuality, quickly degenerated into theocracy wherever it acquired political power, as in Geneva. Lutheranism, too, initially a revolutionary faith targeted against papal supremacy, soon turned into a state religion, serving and sanctifying secular power in Germany and Scandinavia. Altogether, religion on the Continent was associated with mayhem more often than it was with liberty, as the religious wars of the 16th century and the Thirty Years’ War of the 17th century show. In general, it was not safe to pray to the wrong God in Europe, and it was not until the early 20th century that full rights of citizenship became independent of the “right” faith.

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¹Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Bruce Frohnen, ed. (Perseus Books, 2003[1835]), p. 245. Fifty years before, Edmund Burke also was struck by the surprising link between faith and freedom in America. First, “religion in this new people is no way worn out or impaired.” Second, “their mode of professing it is . . . one main cause of this free spirit.” “Member of Parliament Edmund Burke’s Speech on Conciliation with America”, March 22, 1775.

These days are long gone in Europe, but if Tocqueville lived today, he would again be struck by the startling difference he observed in the 1820s. Both America and Europe have pretty much followed the same path to modernization, defined by industrialization, urbanization, individuation, consumerism and democratization. Yet the United States, the very steamroller of modernity, remains a bastion of religiosity, whereas Europe has been steadily “de-Christianizing” for many decades.

There is a wealth of survey data to illustrate the religion gap—though what surveys say always depends on the questions they ask. If a question is posed very generally—say, “Do you belong to any religious

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denomination?”—there are hardly any differences between Western Europe (88 percent) and North America (91 percent).² Asking respondents on either side of the Atlantic whether they consider themselves “a religious person” still produces a fairly narrow gap: 60 percent for Western Europe, 65 percent for Eastern Europe and 71 percent for North America. But as the questions become more specific, the gap widens dramatically. Religion is “very important” for 59 percent of Americans, but only for 27 percent of Italians, the home of the *Una Sancta*. In Germany, only 21 percent check off “very important”, and in France that figure plummets to 11 percent. In 2008, Gallup found that 54 percent of Americans think religion “very important” to their own lives. So there seems to be a slight decline here compared to the 1990s when that figure ranged between 58 and 61 percent. A poll taken in 2009 (“Is religion an important part of your daily life?”) lists among the top nine of the least religious countries six from Europe. Is there a “personal God”? The gap between Western Europe and North America runs almost two to one (62 percent versus 35 percent).

The most vivid way to measure the religion gap is the attendance question. Have you been to church/synagogue at least once during the past week? In the United States, 44 percent claim that they have done so. In Denmark, Latvia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Iceland the number is 4–5 percent. The Czech Republic, Lithuania, Switzerland and Romania are in the 16–20 percent range. France and Hungary come in at 21 percent. Spain, once home to a notorious Inquisition, comes in at 25 percent. Britain reports 27 percent. Austria is at 30 and the Netherlands at 35 percent. In Europe, only three countries score better on the Godliness Index than the United States (tied with Italy at 44–45 percent): Portugal (47 percent), Poland (55 percent) and Ireland (84 percent). The aggregate religion gap, as measured by regular church attendance, is roughly 20 percent for all of Europe versus almost one-half for the United States.

A final, and perhaps most significant, indicator of the God Gap is the question: “Is it necessary to believe in God to be moral?” Almost six out of ten Americans say yes. By the time we cross the Atlantic, the proportion shrinks to 33 percent in Germany, 27 in Italy, 25 in Britain and 13 in France. How strong is the God-goodness link in “New Europe”? In the Czech Republic it is just as weak as in France: Only 13 percent believe that faith is a condition of goodness. In Poland, where the Church is more powerful than elsewhere in Europe, the proportion rises to 38 percent—still a long way from America’s 58 percent. Nietzsche was right, though a century too soon. If people think that religion has no bearing on morality, then God is truly dead in Europe. Or at least He is steadily fading away.

The moral of this statistical tale is that modernity has not undermined American religiosity. Nor has rising prosperity, which is a kind of shorthand for modernity. The normal

²All survey data sources mentioned in this essay are available from the editors upon request.

pattern around the world is an almost perfect inversion: In a scattergram of dozens of nations that relates per-capita income to religiosity, the regression-line comes out straight and almost perfect—the richer, the less religious. Almost perfect because the United States sticks out like a like a sore thumb. (Actually, there is one other country, Kuwait, which is also very rich and religious.) The United States is located way out on the (horizontal) wealth axis yet high above the West Europeans on the faith axis.³

So two centuries after Burke and Tocqueville, the United States remains exceptionalism incarnate, at least insofar as religion and politics goes. Consider a final statistic: In Germany, since 1990, an average of 200,000 members a year have left the Protestant church, and Catholics abscond at an annual rate of 120,000. In the past half-century, Lutheran church membership has been cut in half: from 60 percent of the total population down to 30 percent. Now shift to the United States, where the decline is miniscule: Today almost two-thirds of all Americans belong to a church or synagogue.

How to explain the God Gap? Let's return to the master, Alexis de Tocqueville, as he takes issue with the "Enlightenment-as-secularization" thesis, according to which religiosity wanes as modernity wins:

The philosophers of the 18th century explained the gradual decay of faith in a very simple manner. Religious zeal, said they, must necessarily fail, the more generally liberty is established and knowledge diffused. Unfortunately, facts are by no means in accordance with their theory. There are certain populations in Europe whose unbelief is only equaled by their ignorance and their debasement, whilst in America one of the freest and most enlightened nations in the world fulfils all the outward duties of religious fervor.⁴

Why doesn't the secularization thesis work for the United States? His answer:

The unbelievers of Europe attack the Christians as their *political* opponents, rather than

as their religious adversaries. They hate the Christian religion as the *opinion of a party* much more than an error of belief; and they reject the clergy less because they are the representatives of the Divinity than because they are the *allies of authority*.⁵

This argument about the alliance of altar and throne has been a leitmotif of European history ever since the Church stopped fighting for supremacy over the temporal powers, be they the princes of Italy or the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, and became the loyal servant (and profiteer) of the established secular order. (One exception is Poland, where the Church acted as a silent opponent of Communism; another might have been Italy if the Church had faced not a Christian-Democratic but a Communist postwar regime.) The various branches of Protestantism, too, especially Lutheranism, soon dispensed with their revolutionary zeal to become the champions of national political authority.

Recall the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, consecrated in the Peace of Augsburg of 1555. It laid down the supremacy of kings and potentates over matters of faith, but the deal was in fact more two-sided than "whose realm, his religion" suggested. Protestant or Catholic, the churches enveloped princely power in the legitimacy of "divine right", and the exchange was gifted with myriad privileges. In Germany, the ultimate benefit granted by the state was the collection of the tithe along with income tax, with the former (minus a small carrying charge) disbursed to the established churches (in the late 19th century, the Jews became the third party to the oligopoly).

Hence Tocqueville's point, which in modern parlance is the cleavage between clericalism and anti-clericalism in European politics that has been absent in the United States. This marks yet another dimension of American exceptionalism. Whosoever attacked authority

³The relationship does not work the other way around, as there are a number of quite poor countries, like the Baltic states and Russia, that also score very low on the religiosity index.

⁴*Democracy in America*, p. 245.

⁵*Democracy in America*, p. 250. Emphasis added.

in Europe had to attack the churches. Revolutions were as much anti-clerical as anti-royal, and the French, of course, pushed the issue to the familiar excesses of the 1789 Revolution. The revolutionaries tried to expunge all religious symbols from public life, confiscating church property and replacing Catholic ritual with the “Cult of Reason” or the “Cult of the Supreme Being.” *Laïcité* is still the fiercely defended watchword, five republics later. But throughout Europe, the common denominator of the civil faiths that arose in the 18th and 19th centuries—liberalism, socialism, communism—was anti-clericalism. Fascism and Nazism, too, saw the churches as rivals for power and thus effectively “nationalized” them.

Until this day, to be a progressive in Europe usually implies areligiosity. The European left hated George W. Bush with an extra dollop of vengeance because he was thought to follow divine command in pursuit of policies like the Iraq war—listening to voices like a latter-day Joan of Arc. The following is just an anecdote, but a telling one. Sitting next to German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, a Social Democrat, at a dinner party in 2002, I responded to the derision heaped on George W. by responding (I thought) judiciously: “Mr. Chancellor, you may not believe in God, I don’t believe in God, but why shouldn’t we extend our respect to those like Bush who do?” Schröder became so agitated that he half rose from the table. Fortunately, I had a Cuban cigar handy, which I offered in a gesture of peace. Schröder looked at the label, saw that it was a pleasing brand, and sat down again.

Tocqueville, like Edmund Burke fifty years before him, was quick to grasp this unique, history-transforming difference between Europe and America. The young Americans could make their revolution without burning down churches or murdering priests, as their French epigones did in September 1792 when they massacred some 200 of them, and three bishops to boot. The tree of freedom,

to borrow from Jefferson, did not have to be nourished by the blood of the priesthood. *Tout court*, Tocqueville argues a paradox, but a good one: that the early (and rigorous) separation of church and state, implying a political space vacated by the clergy, had actually strengthened the role of religion in the United States. Or as he put it, the “real authority of religion” was increased by a state of political affairs that had “diminished its apparent force.”⁶ If faith was the friend of freedom, then its champions did not have to fight, despise or deride the faith as an enemy of the Enlightenment.

In Europe, freedom had to be wrested from the Church. The American experience was very different. Starting with the Puritans, Protestantism was dissident *ex ante*, hence an adversary, not an advocate, of King and Church. The Christianity of the settlers

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came with the idea of freedom, a kind of early “liberation theology.” Even better, freedom was gained not by bloody revolution, but by locomotion—to the new Promised Land that was America. Nor could Puritanism triumphant go the theocratic route of Calvinism in Geneva, for the pilgrims had brought along those revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment that did not favor collusion between Church and State. Toleration instead of imposition, reason trumping divine revelation, church and state in two tightly demarcated realms, and finally citizenship as a matter of right rather than conditioned on one’s holding the proper faith—all these ideas were not conducive to planting in America’s virgin soil what the young Americans had left behind in the latter-day Land of Pharaoh.

Both Americans and modern Europeans are children of the Enlightenment, but with a critical difference: In Europe, the child spoke French, as it were, while in America,

⁶*Democracy in America*, p. 246.

the older Scottish-English vernacular prevailed. By the time the French Revolution erupted, the Scottish-English Enlightenment was exactly a hundred years old. In 1689, John Locke published two founding documents: *Two Treatises of Government* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. This is the powerful philosophical tradition that, in turn, inspired the founding documents of the United States: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. For the reasons so well described by Tocqueville, the French version of the Enlightenment was secularist and anti-clerical, starting with Voltaire and Diderot and culminating in Danton's and Robespierre's deadly hatred of all things Deist. But Berkeley and Locke, Hutchinson and Hume, had no problem with God; indeed, "natural law" and "natural right", which transcend man-made law, are pillars of their edifices. Berkeley's empiricism, after all, required God as ultimate proof of reality.

Nor did the American offspring of the Scottish-English Enlightenment have any problem with God. The absence of clericalism, Tocqueville argued, explains the absence of anti-clericalism, which has left such an enduring cleavage in European politics. The churches have lost their old power, but emotionally, anti-clericalism is still a reality on the left half of the spectrum. Since in Europe, religion was part of an oppressive state, something it has not been in America, it had to be banished from the realm of enlightened, democratic politics. Precisely because of the separation of church and state, God, certainly in His non-denominational guise, could easily dwell among His American children, devout or not. Yet in Europe, a truly Christian civilization with myriad churches and cathedrals and religious motifs abounding in music and art, the visitor will not find much God in the public space, let alone at a soccer game—in contrast to an American football stadium. The Treaty of Lisbon, billed as Europe's constitution, does not contain any references to God. It is inconceivable that a French President or a German Chancellor would conclude a speech with "God bless France/Germany" or "God bless you all." Nor do euro bills say "In God We Trust."

Religion strengthens rather than stifles freedom in the United States; that is the long and short of Tocqueville's insight. But the absence of anti-clericalism cannot explain the whole story of American religiosity; it just elucidates why the foes of religion did not acquire the power they did in post-1789 Europe. How then do we explain the unique vitality of religion in the New World, which, at least statistically, puts America in the spiritual neighborhood of the Islamic world and Africa—two areas not exactly blessed by a surfeit of modernity, prosperity and liberty?

The short answer is the inversion of Tocqueville: freedom also strengthens religiosity. Why? Three words: "supply-side religion."

There has never been a church monopoly in the United States as there has been in the Latin or Scandinavian countries, nor a duopoly like in Germany. Established churches were an absolute no-no, as articulated in the First Amendment: Congress shall make no laws whatsoever about religion, neither for nor against. America thus became the first free market for religion, one where monopolies, especially state-sponsored ones, are out and entry barriers are low. God's own country could be owned by many gods, so to speak, and none had a corner on the market. If you don't like Puritan Boston, as Benjamin Franklin did not, you left for worldly Quaker Philadelphia. Or for Catholic Maryland. If you didn't like the religious politics of Harvard (too liberal for Cotton Mather), you went off to found Yale in the "true spirit" of Christ.

In other words: Alone in the Western world, Americans can not only get away from religion; they can also choose their own. Add to this another distinctive American trait: a weak state and a strong society whose members were not only free to "do their thing", but were more or less forced to do it without the help of the state. Government could neither constrain nor sustain them, be it in their worldly or religious pursuits. Tocqueville noticed that, too: "Americans . . . constantly form associations. They have . . . association of . . . a thousand kinds, in which all take part—religious, moral, serious, futile . . . to give entertainments, to found establishments for education . . . to construct churches, to

send missionaries to the antipodes.” That do-it-yourself godliness is the essence of supply-side religion in America, and it was nicely satirized in Sinclair Lewis’s *Elmer Gantry* (1927), where a con man and a female evangelist sell religion to small-town America.

Until this day, religion in America is a competitive enterprise with easy market entry and almost no regulation. If in the old days, Quakers went off to Pennsylvania and Catholics to Maryland, anybody can start a congregation or a mega-church today. Not so in Europe. It is either the parish church or none. Of course, everybody is free to start a something (provided he does not run afoul of the authorities’ definition of a “proper” religion, like Scientology or Jehovah’s Witnesses). But in a country like Germany, with its oligopoly of Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism and Judaism, market entry is difficult. How does a start-up compete against established churches supported by the government with special public status and taxes collected by the state? It is like trying to start a privately funded opera

that has to charge full price for admission, while the State Opera next door sells heavily subsidized tickets. A religious start-up would have to collect tithes on its own and produce without subsidies the social services congregants take for granted: old-age homes, hospitals, cemeteries, summer camps and even religious education, which in Germany and throughout much of Europe is organized within the public school system.

Back to Tocqueville: “In America religion is perhaps less powerful than it has been [in Europe] but its influence is more lasting. It restricts itself to its own resources, but of these none can deprive it; its circle is limited to certain principles, but those . . . are entirely its own, and under its undisputed control.”⁷ This is why, in a country like France where Church and State used to be twins, the Catholic Church fell on such hard times after it was expelled from this cozy family union in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

In modern terminology: If anybody can launch a start-up and respond to changing market conditions with something new, then supply creates its own demand. Lesbian rabbis? Why not? Even Conservative synagogues now have them. Orthodox dietary laws? We won’t look into your cupboards if you join our Reform temple. Too much Jesus? Go Unitarian. If your parish is too small for you, join a mega- or giga-church. If we dislike our minister or rabbi, we’ll just move out and hire our own. Surely, this explains the amazing vitality of religion in the United States: The richer the offers, the more numerous the takers. This is the essence of supply-side economics.

Economic analysis (or rational choice) helps to explain not only American religiosity, but also the secularization—or “de-Christianization”—of Europe. It is true, as some have argued, that market entry has become easier in late 20th-century Europe,

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but without improving religiosity.⁸ So supply-side religion, the argument implies, is at best only a partial theory, which may work for the United States but not for Europe. But the puzzle is not hard to crack. To begin with, “deregulation” in Europe, especially where the churches enjoy established status, has not proceeded very far. Second, the link between “deregulation” and religiosity is bound to be weak in Europe because it is overwhelmed by a more powerful variable: the relentless expansion of the modern welfare state.

It has certainly grown faster than religious regulations have contracted. The modern welfare state may well be the worst, though

⁷*Democracy in America*, p. 248.

⁸For instance, see Steve Bruce, “The Supply-Side Model of Religion: The Nordic and Baltic States”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (March 2000).

unwitting, enemy of the church in the marketplace of allegiance. Why so? From time immemorial, churches have catered not only to the spiritual needs of their flocks. They have also provided essential social services like charity, hospitals, old-age homes, orphanages, schools and counseling (a.k.a. confession). Thus the clergy provided a large basket of very secular public and private goods that their “customers” could not easily acquire elsewhere. That made for “brand loyalty” and power.

Yet after World War II, an expanding European welfare state started grabbing ever more market share. By a rough measure, the government’s take of GDP has doubled from a bit more than a quarter in the middle of the last century to a bit less than one-half of GDP today (a bit more in France and Sweden). Simultaneously, transfer payments and social benefits (ranging from pensions to unemployment benefits to health care to housing subsidies) as a percentage of GDP have doubled from the mid-teens to the mid-thirties. So has the size of the “caring class” that comes with the growth of the welfare state. What nuns and priests used to do when not ministering to God, full-time employees of the state now deliver.

With its ballooning benefits, the paternal state has pushed aside Mother Church. It generously provides as a matter of entitlement what the church once gave by way of charity (demanding fealty in return). The state marries and buries you, and in between it heals, feeds, schools and shelters you. Charity is granted not by the grace of God but by legal entitlement. The state has even muscled into a central market segment of the clergy: spiritual help. State-run health services provide psychotherapy, and the welfare bureaucracy dispatches street workers to deliver psychiatric social work. Why assume the obligations of church membership if the government hands out its services for free? Even those who take these benefits from the church need not pay too much in terms of devoutness or allegiance. Given the strong competitor next door, which seems to demand nothing, they can always jump ship and go for the benefits offered by Father State.

How have Europe’s churches responded to their loss of market share? One competitive

response to the government’s poaching has been the clergy’s counter-foray into the properly political arena. The religious Left, in particular, has moved into environmental, gender and immigration politics, preaching the virtues of multiculturalism and condemning the vices of capitalism and globalization. But pursuing such sidelines at the expense of the core business has not proven a unique selling proposition, as the steady drop in membership suggests. Apparently, a secularizing church is not an antidote to secularization.

So far, we have used historical, political and economic variables to explain much of the variance between Europe and America. Let us now look at culture, which is usually corralled to explain the variance that is not otherwise accounted for.

Given their own culture, Europeans have never understood, let alone cheered on, American religiosity. Escaping to Philadelphia from the terror of the French Revolution, Talleyrand quipped: “Thirty-two religions and only one dish to eat.”⁹ In other words, too much faith and too little class, which is an archetype of the European *Kulturkritik* of America. Or listen to Hegel, who bemoaned too many “sects which rise to the extreme of insanity, many of which conduct services in the grip of ecstasy and even the most sensual silliness.”¹⁰ Revivalism, the four Great Awakenings, is completely alien to the European Protestant mind—and certainly to Catholic ritual, which is tightly scripted. It is too much rapture, physicality and anarchy. And too much hype and hucksterism, as targeted not only in the prewar novels of Sinclair Lewis but also today by secular-liberal America, which shows its contempt for televangelists and other ordained entrepreneurs.

But a more sober look reveals yet another side of the fertile and enduring marriage between

⁹As quoted in Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 41.

¹⁰Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* in *Werke*, Vol. 12 (Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 112.

Christianity and “Americanism.” Evangelical or “born-again” Christianity builds on the belief that you can choose baptism and hence godliness at any time in life, reflecting a very typical, and very secular, American conviction. It is the principle of the “second chance,” the spiritual version of “yes, we can.” Isn’t the “second chance” a quintessential Americanism? Shedding the past and starting out anew, just like the settlers did when they turned their backs on Europe? It can be done by your own choice and effort. And this works in heaven as it does on earth. “Bornagainism”, to coin a phrase, reflects and reinforces the individualism and optimism of the American secular experience.

The point here is once more that Burke and Tocqueville’s religion-freedom nexus works both ways. Faith, as organized in the United States, strengthens freedom, they argued, but freedom also affects and infects religion, creating a uniquely American ideology that mixes the sacred and secular in a transcendent optimism. America’s ur-religion, Puritanism, was an English version of Calvinism, which was dour and unforgiving, given its obsession with the “predestined salvation or damnation of every individual” (as Calvin put it in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536). Yet by the time Calvinism had sunk roots in America, it had turned into a culture of optimistic self-helpism. It is do-it-yourself salvation instead of “unconditional election” or the “complete corruption of humanity” resulting from Original Sin. God would help those who helped themselves. Nowhere else, certainly not in Europe, does religion thus energize a perfectly secular ideology centered on individual choice, self-reliance and salvation in the here and now.¹¹ Let’s call this “Americanism.” Contrast this with the European experience, which rather confirms a pessimistic outlook on life and on the limits of individual action. No wonder that Europeans are flummoxed, even repelled, by the Evangelical spirit of American Protestantism—as was Hegel.

So let us return to the Great Master and his profound grasp of what was specifically American: the benign fusion of the sacred and secular, of God and governance. “Religion in America”, he wrote, “takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must nevertheless be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions . . . for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions.”¹² In the contemporary vernacular: In the United States, religion is as American as apple pie, because the American creed feeds precisely on the beliefs—optimism, self-improvement, secular transcendence—that also inform American Protestantism and have also infected American Catholicism and Judaism.

In America, the twain have met in an easy

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embrace, even though church and state are separated by iron walls. This is why Abraham Lincoln could say (as did all of his successors in so many words): “That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.” This is language no European President or Prime Minister would use. Religion and freedom are no longer foes in Europe, but neither are they friends. Spiritual and worldly salvation are no longer invoked together, and God, this once mighty but now slightly embarrassing presence, has been politely ushered out of the public space. In Europe, the twain shall not meet again, and this is why America and Europe remain as apart as they were in the days of Tocqueville. 🍷

¹¹Max Weber ascribed to classical Calvinism precisely this “energizing” quality of saving, investment and hard work, which formed the road to capitalism. Note, though, that Calvinism’s predestination doctrine does not contain the idea of salvation by individual effort. Hard work and worldly success merely prove that the person who excels in it has already been “elected.”

¹²*Democracy in America*, p. 243.