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### Primordialists and Constructionists: a typology of theories of religion

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## **PRIMORDIALISTS AND CONSTRUCTIONISTS:**

### **A TYPOLOGY OF THEORIES OF RELIGION**

It is routinely commented that there is no mainstream general theory of religion (Guthrie 1996: 412). There are, to be sure, meta-theories which synthesize elements from a variety of competing meso-level explanations (Atran 2002; Riesebrodt 2010; Stölz 2009). This paper will not attempt such an ambitious task. Instead, it seeks to assess and map theories of the origin and reproduction of religion in conceptual space. The aim of this atlas is therefore to classify rather than specify mechanisms, i.e. to examine the range of current approaches to religion and secularization, and, in the spirit of Occam's Razor, reduce these to their lowest common denominators. It is hoped that this will streamline the study of religion, rendering it more systematic and effective. In the process, new sightlines for theory and research should emerge. Formerly concealed similarities and differences between competing theories are rendered clearer and more systematic. This structures the growing plethora of approaches to enable researchers to better select among them when interpreting concrete cases.

Does a parsimonious map of existing theories already exist? The study of religion is currently bifurcated along the dependent variable, between those who herald the inevitable demise of religion and their antagonists who view it as eternal. 'The discussion is lively, to say the least,' remarks Stölz, 'with opponents accusing each other of serious errors of fact, revisionism, incompetence, untruthfulness' (Stölz 2009: 345-6). Yet the underlying causal logic behind the reigning 'secularization v. rational choice' antinomy remains opaque, and only tenuously connected with explanations for the origin of religion. This article seeks to deploy nationalism theory to make better sense of existing frameworks in the theory of

religion, and, in so doing, draw attention to neglected lines of argument. It begins by setting out a two-category ideal-type of *primordialist* and *constructionist* theories of religion. It then unpacks this into a finer-grained nine-point categorization to better explain the relationship between leading schools of thought in the discipline. The article begins with nationalism theory, then applies this framework to religion. It first distinguishes theories of origins from reproduction, then parses materialist from culturalist strands of constructionist thought.

### Primordialism and Constructionism

The template for this endeavour is the 'primordialist-constructionist' typology, an ideal-typical distinction which structures debates in ethnicity and nationalism. This classification distinguishes between theories which posit the enduring, rooted and emotive nature of ethnicity/nations; and those which aver that such phenomena are constructed, malleable, or interest-based. The relationship with modernity is key here: constructionists consider nations to be modern, while primordialists assign them a premodern or even prehistoric origin.

While most constructionists claim that modernity gives birth to nationalism and ethnic exclusion, many deem post-modernity to be much less conducive to nationalism. Unsurprisingly, those who view ethnic and national groups as deeply rooted are skeptical of the claim that they will be superseded whereas those who view these phenomena as constructed are apt to consider them transitory developments in human history that may be replaced by other social formations (Smith 1990; Hobsbawm 1998). These categories should not be treated as watertight boxes into which individuals or their ideas may be slotted. Rather, they should, in the spirit of Max Weber, be considered ideal types, exaggerations which help us construct abstract concepts with which to depict reality. Actual scholars and their theories

would be distributed along a continuum defined by the primordialist and constructionist poles. Most blend aspects of the two. Thus very few scholars openly embrace the 'primordialist' label.<sup>1</sup> More may be found at the constructionist end of the spectrum, but a growing group accept that while identities are constructed, they are resistant to rapid change.<sup>2</sup> The primordialist-constructionist categorization, as applied to both nationalism and religion, appears in table 1 below.

**Table 1. Nationalism and Religion: Two Ideal Types**

|                        | <b>Ethnic Group, Nation</b>   | <b>Religion</b>   |
|------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Primordialist</b>   | Ethnicity and nationalism have a primordial origin, and are deeply rooted in human evolutionary psychology. Therefore they are unlikely to be superseded  | Religion has a primordial origin, and is deeply rooted in human evolutionary psychology. Therefore it is unlikely to be superseded  |
| <b>Constructionist</b> | Ethnic groups and nations are constructed for political and economic reasons. Modernity causes them to emerge, rise, then to fall. Therefore they will be superseded by transnational cultural forms as material realities change | Religions are constructed for political and economic reasons. Modernity causes them to rise, then to fall. Therefore they will be superseded by secular cultural forms as material realities change |

Table 1 uses the terms 'religion' and 'religions', 'nationalism' and 'nations', and some may object that the singular and plural should not be conflated. That the human compulsion to connect with the supernatural order through religion must be distinguished from identification with concrete religious groups. While admitting that the two are not coterminous, it is also the case that the social aspect of the singular, religion, means that

instances of the general will, *ipso facto*, take shape as particular religions. Thus the forces that produce religion in man necessarily spawn religions. The same is true for nationalism and nations.

## Theories of Nationalism

The division between primordialists and constructionists in nationalism theory seems to capture both the 'why', and the 'when' of nations and ethnic groups, viz.:

**Why:** Constructionists locate the motivation for ethnicity and nationalism primarily in material, i.e. political and economic, drivers. Nations and ethnic groups crystallise, mutate and dissolve as technological, economic and political imperatives change. Some constructionists are symbolists, who accept that these groups are consecrated by deeply-institutionalized cultural myths and repertoires and hence more resistant to change.

Primordialists reply that, regardless of material incentives or past cultural constructions, ethnic groups and nations are rooted in human evolutionary psychology and therefore here to stay.

**When:** Constructionists, who consider political and economic factors paramount, remark that it is only when it becomes in the interest of ruling elites to incorporate the lower orders that ethnic and national groups form and local peasantries are 'ushered into history'. This cannot transpire until the premodern model of mercenary armies and feudal politico-economic relations gives way to the revolutionary trinity of mass conscript militaries, popular sovereignty and market capitalism. Some constructionists, known as symbolists, deviate

somewhat from this model in that they accept that cultures can spread beyond the local even during the premodern period. They claim that there were scores of ethnic and national communities recorded after the advent of literate civilization, fused together through conquest, confederation or religious networks, in which elites and masses made common cause (Smith 1998). Finally, primordialists reply that even illiterate face-to-face communities of several hundred can unite around a belief in common ancestry and thus be considered ethnic. Thus ethnic groups reach back into mankind's evolutionary past (van den Berghe 1979).

## Religion and Nationalism

Will conceptual transplants from ethnicity and nationalism studies take root in religious soil? One reason they might is that both involve cultural communities. Some even claim that religion and ethnicity emerged symbiotically. The foundation myths of the Greeks, Jews and Sumerians, for instance, fused beliefs about Creation with those of ethnic origins. The idea that ' "we" [ethnic group] constitute the first of the earth's communities,' and are bound by a special God-given Law - such as the codes of Hammurabi and Moses - provides an umbilical connection between the two (Smith 1986: 34-5).

With the advent of text-based religion, the two concepts drew ever closer. Axial Age proselytizing faiths were concerned with this world as much as the next. Abrahamic texts located prophets like Jesus or Muhammad among other historic individuals (i.e. Pontius Pilate) in real places (i.e. Red Sea) in this world. Religious commentaries drew lessons from Scripture and related them to concrete events and personages. Religious communities like the Muslim umma or Christendom thereby came to possess a sense of territoriality and history. Sacred centers - Al Azhar, Qom, Rome, Jerusalem - produced commentaries and narratives

for the entire religious community. Occasionally these smuggled in political and territorial designs not vastly different from those of nationalists. As with ethnic groups and nations, they aspired to political unity, imperialism or even theocracy. This informs the Caliphate ideology of contemporary Islamist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which seek to unify the umma under one political roof. The caesaropapism of Pope Gregory VII in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century or of the Byzantine Orthodox Church furnish other examples.

Yet ethnicity and nationalism differ from religion and it is no accident the two are generally discussed in different academic quarters. As conceived here, religion requires a supernatural connection which nationalism does not. Fellow ethnics must share a belief in common ancestry whereas fellow religious communicants need not. The French Revolution defined the nation in territorial and secular-historical terms. Its utopianism is immanent rather than transcendent: it located its dreams in this world rather than the next, and identified the agent of change as natural, human and materialistic rather than cosmic. Though nationalism appropriates many of the functions, doctrines and practices of religion, it is oriented to territory and political aspiration.

Several writers point to the replacement of a cyclical conception of time based on holy festivals with a linear orientation based on measurable intervals like centennials or anniversaries. So too with the sense of territory, whereby measurable borders, grasped by the population through maps, redefines the perception of the population from cosmic to national reference points (Anderson 1983). None of this takes away from the fact that religion can serve as a marker of ethnicity and notions of the supernatural can frame national narratives of election or divine mission. Yet such connections are not necessary, as the anti-clerical nationalisms of the Catholic, Jewish and Muslim worlds underscore.

## Theorizing Religion

Before proceeding further, we must briefly define our terms of reference. Religion is a contested concept, and the definition of religion is a major point of contention in the field. On the one hand are those who view religion as a broad category which encompasses 'religioid' phenomena such as celebrity worship, spectator sports and secular ideologies like socialism or nationalism (Benthall 2008). On the other are those who fear, in the spirit of King, Keohane and Verba (1994), that an open-ended stretching of the concept empties it of meaning. If the former, expansive, definition is followed, then nationalism and religion are conjoined and the task of theorizing both becomes a simple one. More challenging is to accept a stricter definition of religion and attempt to apply theories derived from the study of nationalism to it. Thus this paper takes up the greater challenge of mapping theories of religion, with religion more narrowly conceived. Accordingly, we begin with Steve Bruce's definition of religion as 'beliefs, actions and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency (that is, gods) or impersonal powers ... which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs' (Bruce 2002: 2). Restated, religion must involve a belief in the existence of superhuman powers. In addition, these cannot reside solely in the mind of an individual, but must be expressed socially (Riesebrodt 2010: 74-5).

The notion of the secular is also problematic. Jose Casanova, for instance, traces its roots to Christian theology, without which it could not exist (Casanova 2008). Others suggest that those from non-Christian cultures often struggle to distinguish the religious from the secular (Benthall 2008: 8-9). Once more, this paper accepts ambiguity but reaches for an exclusive definition of the secular as a test for the robustness of the argument. Processes legitimated by this-worldly referents - as opposed to supernatural ones - will be labelled secular. Secularization will be used to refer to the process of moving from a religious to a secular order. In other words, secularization describes a durable decline in the power of



religion in the public or private sphere. Note that this decline need not be terminal in nature, thus it becomes possible to speak of periods of secularization and of religious revival.

The conceptual relationship between religion and secularization is vital, and marks an important difference from nationalism. Whereas the alternatives to nation and ethnic group are various, i.e. empire, lifestyle enclave, city-state or status group, this is not true of religion in relation to secularism. Indeed, religion and secularism are locked in an epistemic zero-sum embrace. In other words, both cannot be rising at the same time. While different aspects of the two, i.e. the rising private practice of religion and growing separation of church and state, can move together in certain periods, the general long-term tendency is for the two to conflict. As one advances, the other retreats, and vice-versa.<sup>3</sup> The corollary of this is that any theory of religion must offer a companion account of secularization to arrive at a complete explanation.

### Modernity, Nationalism and Religion

Most constructionist theorists of nationalism take it for granted that religion defined the premodern order from which nations emerged (Gellner 1983). Theorists of religion do not contest this interpretation. However, there is a vigorous debate over the modernity of both fundamentalism and secularism which parallels the conversation taking place in nationalism studies. For David Martin:

Controversies in studies of nationalism over whether the nation is ancient or modern can be cross-referenced with controversies in the sociology of religion over secularization... According to strong theories of secularization the western European

situation presages the wider global future. That implies there is an absolutely crucial transition from pre-modern to modern, from religious to secular, from religious to political, from Church to nation and party, and from the traditional or charismatic to the rationalised and bureaucratic (Martin 2011).

From a different angle, writers who study religious fundamentalism often remark upon its rationality and modernity, suggesting that premodern fundamentalist pedigrees and exemplars are manufactured or reinterpreted by modern religious entrepreneurs (Esposito 2002). Some bring the two perspectives together insofar as fundamentalism is viewed as the response of a marginalized fringe left behind by modernity or a growing pain of modernizing societies on the road to secularism (Bruce 2002). Hence early modernity calls forth an intensification and massification of religion, while late modernity spawns religious decline.

Primordialist theories of religion contest the idea that secularism is modern. Scott Atran, for instance, avows that hunter-gatherer peoples actually operate with a clear distinction between secular-causal and religious forms of reasoning (Atran 2002: 84). Stark and Finke add that there have always been freethinkers, agnostics and the unchurched: their numbers rise and fall cyclically over time and place. Modernity is not special in this regard, for the modern period in the West has witnessed both fervent revivals (as in 1825-50) and periods of religious decline, as in the late eighteenth century and since the 1960s (Stark and Finke. 2000: 63-71). Georges Minois' history of atheism claims that unbelief is a universal outlook that has existed alongside religion since the dawn of man (quoted in Benthall 1998: 10). The view that secular processes have occurred throughout human history is a radical idea, because it breaks the temporal conjunctions of religion-as-premodern and

secularization-as-modern. If religion and secularization are enduring facts of human existence, religion cannot be destined for the scrapheap of history.

### Constructed or Primordial?: The Causes of Religious Demand

The existing dichotomy in the sociology of religion between secularization and rational choice theory does not adequately capture the aforementioned constructionist-primordialist divide because the materialism of much rational choice theory (RCT) aligns it with secularization theory.

### *Constructionist Theories of Religion*

Neo-RCT takes preferences as given, so cannot provide a theory of religious motivation. However, those who employ a classical *homo economicus* rational choice approach - in which actors are motivated by a surplus of pecuniary benefits over costs - are materialist in orientation. People join religion to improve their lot in this world. Benefits can extend to prestige and honor: Bourdieu envisions religion as a source of cultural capital which may be exchanged for economic and political goods. Thus religious status as a priest or office holder within a church hierarchy confers symbolic power which helps to underpin hierarchies of social competition and domination (Swartz 1996). The church may serve as a vehicle for social assistance, employment or advancement, prompting individuals to gravitate to it for material reasons. They opt for sects and cults out of material desperation, since strict religions generate valuable 'club goods' for members, raising the value of religious membership and rendering exit costly (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Berman 2000).<sup>4</sup>

Power considerations also bulk large in constructionist theories of religion. Half a century ago, Clifford Geertz remarked upon 'well-established propositions as that ancestor worship supports the jural authority of elders... that ritual groupings reflect political oppositions, or that myths provide charters for social institutions and rationalizations of social privilege' (Geertz 1973: 88). Neo-Marxists go further: religion pacifies the exploited so they may better serve the elite's self-interested quest for wealth and power. For Gramsci (1971), this smooths the path of a hegemonic order based on exploitation. Only when mankind overcomes his alienation through socialism is this condition alleviated.

Emile Durkheim's oeuvre shares little with Marx's, but when it comes to religion, the rubric of constructionism is capacious enough to enfold both. For Durkheim, religion arises because it is functional for social integration in hunter-gatherer societies. With modernity, the locus of integration migrates from religion to the secular nation-state. In France, the nation replaced the deity and monarch after 1789 as the basis of popular worship, symbolized by the secular fêtes which were modelled on Catholic rituals (Smith 2003). This undoubtedly influenced this French sociologist's work. For Durkheim, secularism can only proceed because the nation, a secularized form of religion, takes over the integrative function that religion once performed. Sounding a similar functionalist note, Talcott Parsons makes the case that religion is one of the six key universals of social evolution, vital for legitimating an agrarian hierarchy of rulers and ruled. Without this step, advanced political organization and the accumulation of a capital surplus become impossible (Parsons 1964: 345-6). Again, religion is derivative of social imperatives.

For Durkheim and Parsons, the need for socio-political order is the ultimate architect of religion. The emotional longings of the individual are constructed by society, not primordial. In this, these functionalist thinkers are at one with David Martin and Steve Bruce's cultural defence theory - in which religion is maintained by nations and ethnic groups

for use as a secular group boundary marker. A related view is the political defence theory that yokes religion's popularity to the political horses it bets on. The Spanish Church's links to the hated Franco injured Catholicism, but Pope John Paul's popular resistance to communism abetted it (Martin [1978] 1993; Bruce 2002:31-4; Philpott 2007). Without a job to do for its secular masters, religion would wither. Those who cite social norms, government coercion or socialization (McLeod 1998; Voas 2003) as the true anchors of religion are likewise constructionist. Those who disavow secularization theory in favor of a 'multiple modernities' approach, lean in a similar direction (Davie 2007, ch. 5; Berger 1999; Greeley 2002). This is because the multiple modernities approach suggests the trajectory of religion is governed by social particulars, not psychological universals.<sup>5</sup>

### *Primordialist Theories of Religion*

Whereas constructionism perceives ethnic and religious demand to be human creations, primordialism considers them irrepressible psychological constants. Pierre van den berghe writes that when peoples' interest-based ('type II') attachments are in jeopardy they respond rationally whereas when their familial or ethnic ('type I') attachments are threatened, they react emotively (van den berghe 1979; Horowitz 2001). Hence the greater power of ethnic, as opposed to class, appeals. Passions play an analogous role in many primordialist theories of religion. Classic anthropological explanations for religion based on mankind's need for meaning (Geertz 1973) or security in the face of the inexplicable (Malinowski and Redfield 1948), for example, are rooted in emotional drives. Consequently, for these writers, psychological mindstates such as hope, awe and fear are paramount, and explain the universality of religion across human societies.<sup>6</sup> Others point to religion's ability to satisfy 'peak' emotions deriving from our core evolutionary adaptations (Atran 2002: 17).

In nationalism theory, rational choice perspectives are firmly associated with constructionism (Hechter 2000; Laitin 2007). The principal reason this does not obtain for theories of religion is the unfortunate tendency to elide RCT with Stark and Iannaccone's supply-side paradigm. Supply-side theorists use the *form* of RCT but their conception of human nature is inherently primordialist. Their neo-RCT deems that individual preferences extend beyond material interests to encompass spiritual and collective goods. In addition, these spiritual desires are held to often trump material ones (if this were otherwise, religion could easily be replaced by other social constructs). In the supply-side account, we possess a primordial demand for religion. The difference between religious and secular societies therefore cannot be located in differing levels of demand - a psychological constant - but only in variations in the efficacy of religious supply (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Therefore it is supply-siders' primordialism, not their rational choice framework, that does the heavy lifting in the model.

This explains why the supply-side model is closely related to approaches which appear at first glance to be of a wholly different order. Van den berghe's theory of ethno-collective nepotism, in which those who favor genetic relatives maximise evolutionary fitness, has its counterpart in theories of religion which posit that a belief in supernatural agents helped our ancestors overcome collective action problems (E.O. Wilson 1998; Alcorta and Sosis 2004; Hinde 2009). David Sloan Wilson (2002: 28) argues for a two-step process by which genetic evolution sets the stage for the cultural evolution of adaptive moral communities. Others maintain that religion's positive selection effects are ongoing, pointing to the contemporary fertility advantage of religious over secular women (Blume 2010; Kaufmann 2011; Rowthorn 2011).

## Toward a Classification of Actual Theories of Religion

Like any ideal-type, the primordialist-constructionist binary contains important cleavages which are exposed when the type-concept is applied to actual cases. In the next part of the paper, we expand our classification from one to three dimensions, yielding an increase from two to nine categories. This entails unpacking the constructionist-primordialist binary by parsing out: a) theories of origins from those of reproduction; and, within the latter, theories of religious persistence from those of secularization; and b) materialist from symbolic forms of constructionism. In so doing, the most critical nuances within primordialism and constructionism are brought to the surface (see table 2). Theories of the origin and reproduction of religion are capitalized in table 2 to show that, in practice, these categories are not mutually exclusive in the same way as the others. One can of course combine other categories together to construct a theory, but in contrast to the origins/reproduction question, this requires the theorist to qualify the power of primordial, symbolic or material factors, or processes of persistence or decline.

**Table 2. A Nine-Part Classification of Theories of Religion**

|                     |                       | Constructionist    |                  | Primordialist |
|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|
|                     |                       | <i>Materialist</i> | <i>Symbolist</i> |               |
| <b>ORIGINS</b>      |                       |                    |                  |               |
| <b>REPRODUCTION</b> | <i>Persistence</i>    |                    |                  |               |
|                     | <i>Secularization</i> |                    |                  |               |

### Distinguishing Theories of Origins from those of Reproduction

In contrast to our other two dimensions, the question of origins can be neatly separated from that of reproduction. Thus one can, for example, readily combine a full-orbed

primordialist explanation of origins with a secularization theory regarding the reproduction of religion.

Indeed, many writers do precisely this. Secularization theorists like Weber, Freud and even Marx do not reject the importance of our emotions: indeed they grant that there are psychological pulls in a primordial direction. Best described as 'soft primordialists,' they recognize that religion has a primordial origin and grant its intuitive appeal, but adduce that when it comes to religious reproduction, modern secular influences either override religious emotions or offer substitutes for it. In other words, the forces that birthed religion are not sufficient to sustain it. For Freud, science and reason unmask the claims of religion, a childish neurosis. Be that as it may, religion is powered by biological and psychological 'necessities' that are not so easily sloughed off. Its departure is therefore psychologically problematic. In its wake trails an inchoate, unconscious longing (akin to Matthew Arnold's 'long, withdrawing roar') which the mature individual can only endure with resignation and uncertainty (Freud 1927: 39, 50; 1933). Weber, too, in his sociology of disenchantment, accepts that the new bureaucratic order does not satisfy the psychological needs which religion once addressed (Weber [1922]1978).

Many New Atheists, notably Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, have a background in biology or neuroscience which inclines them to concur with these sentiments. They accept the primordialist account of the rise of religion, and acknowledge its psychological appeal. Dawkins and Dennett both concur that the folk religions of hunter-gatherers had a basis in natural selection (Dawkins 2006: 190; Dennett 2006: 151). With the advent of text-based religions, however, cultural replicators (memes) largely displace genes. Memes such as religion may act like viruses, which hurt us, or they may exert a neutral or positive effect on our reproductive fitness (Dennett 2006: 184-5). Though keying in to on our evolved dispositions, New Atheist writers argue that religion has no monopoly over them: our



emotions are not religio-specific, thus secular forms of culture can elbow religion aside.

Norris and Inglehart echo this position: individuals' Maslovian hierarchy of needs begins with physical security, the absence of which creates a demand for religious compensators. Once modern states and markets provide material security, the need for religion fades away (Inglehart 1971; Norris and Inglehart 2004: 13-17). Once again, theories of religious origins are somewhat orthogonal in their approach to those analyzing religious reproduction or secularization.

The principal difference between soft and orthodox primordialists is that the former surmise that social forces override or better service the psychological impulses which give rise to religion, whereas the latter aver that the psychological power of religion is ineffable. Consider the subtle difference between Daniel Bell, an orthodox primordialist who fully recognises the social power of secularism, and Anthony Giddens, a soft primordialist who privileges the social but grants the emotional draw of religion. Both write convincingly of the detraditionalizing thrust of modernity and the psychological hole left by the departure of religion. However, while Giddens' soft primordialism avows a Freudian 'return of the repressed' spiritual questions leading to a wide variety of cultural expressions, Bell's orthodox primordialism predicts a more specific 'great instauration' of religion (Giddens 1991; Bell 1976).

The primordialist-constructionist binary is occluded in other ways by actual theorists. Cognitivist approaches, in particular, confound this neat overlay. Some cognitivist theories suit the primordialist category: they maintain that religion gains traction because it calls forth counterintuitive images (i.e. flying hominids, devils) which imprint religion into our memory (Atran & Norenzayan 2004; Atran 2002, ch. 4; Boyer 2001, ch. 3). However, other cognitivists deem religion to be an attempt to explain the world in the absence of science. As scientific knowledge progresses, religion is concomitantly eroded (Frazer 1951; Tylor 1958;

Horton 1967). This contention springs from evolutionary psychology, so is primordial. But it predicts secularization.

### Constructionism: Material or Symbolic

Having addressed the importance of distinguishing origins and reproduction, we are in a position to consider the difference between materialist and symbolic forms of constructionism.

### *Symbolist Theories*

Not all who claim that the demand for nations or religions is constructed endorse the dictum that ideas are second-order phenomena. Some constructionists, known as symbolists in the nationalism literature, maintain that ethnic groups emerged because they resonated with existing understandings based on religious sect (i.e. Judaism, Druze) or memories of ancient kingdoms (i.e. Aragon for Catalans). This process resembles Dawkins' 'memplex' in which religion as meme succeeds because it is well adapted to other memes in its cultural environment (Dawkins 2006: 200). Thus previous constructs condition and constrain subsequent ones. Whereas materialist theories permit rapid change and typically view the modern age as a fulcrum, symbolist arguments state that changes are constrained and proceed in evolutionary rather than revolutionary fashion. Indeed, the difference between symbolist

and materialist versions of constructionism is so great that the former may be considered a distinct category.

Symbolists work with Emile Durkheim's 'social facts': collective representations and memories which are reproduced over time (Durkheim [1893] 1984; Durkheim [1897] 1966). Eschewing the strictly bio-psychological foundations of primordialism, symbolism privileges the *mythomoteur* - a complex of myths and symbols - which are treated as historically persistent phenomena (Armstrong 1982; Smith 1986). New constructions, in order to be successful, must 'resonate', to use Smith's term, with pre-existing understandings. This explains cases of successful nation-building, such as post-1789 France, but also those of failure, most notably in postcolonial 'nations by design' such as Sudan or post-partition Pakistan (Smith 1983).

Symbolism foregrounds a theory of religion in which culture is the independent variable. Religious texts, commentaries, priesthoods, liturgies, beliefs and institutions gain momentum as social facts, reproducing themselves over time. This perspective is less well-developed in theories of religion. It is, however, evident in Scott Atran's recent work (2010) when he speaks of 'sacred values', which often trump instrumental interests and are not susceptible to rational negotiation. Talal Asad's contention that Islam is a 'discursive tradition' not beholden to the caprice of material or political considerations, or William Graham's conception of Islam as a 'deep structure' independent of the vicissitudes of political expediency echo this view that religious forms possess autonomous social power (Anjum 2007; Graham 1993).

Though symbolist arguments are nominally constructionist, most symbolists combine their culturalist arguments with a primordialist conception of the individual (Smith 2009; Kaufman 1996; Ozkirimli 2010: ch. 5). They hold that ethnic myths and symbols derive their

power from the emotions which they evoke. Passions are encoded in collective representations and narratives, which account for combatants' willingness to lay down their lives in war or commit violent acts against neighbors (Smith 2009; Horowitz 2001). Symbolist theorists of nationalism flag the romantic motivation of nationalist intellectuals and their search for authenticity, not mere self-interest (Hutchinson 1987). Kaufman (1996) draws more explicitly on cognitive neuroscience and its relationship to the content of ethnic narratives. He makes the case that myths are not just rhetorical window-dressing: differences in the content of nationalist messages and mass beliefs (i.e. Tutsi as 'cockroaches') regulate levels of emotion and, by extension, the intensity of ethnic violence.

So too with symbolist writers on religion. Cultural values strike a chord not only because they mesh with existing understandings, but because they encode emotional responses in their symbols, narratives and rituals. Hence Geertz' claim that religion constitutes 'a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men' (1973: 90). The key question in appraising Geertz is whether the psychic 'moods and motivations' are cause or effect. If they channel individuals in a religio-specific direction, then secular ideas cannot access them, and they pull society ineluctably toward religion. If, on the other hand, these emotions are weak or nonspecific, they can be tapped by secular constructs or repressed by the norms of a society's emotional regime.<sup>7</sup>

Symbolist arguments are central to New Atheist thinking. Why else such a pronounced stress on the battle of ideas? To wit, Sam Harris warns that one need look no further than the Qur'an and hadiths to find the cause of Islamist terrorism. 'Anyone who can read [violent, exclusive] passages such as these...and still not see a link between Muslim faith and Muslim violence,' he remarks, 'should probably consult a neurologist' (Harris 2004: 23, 137). Christopher Hitchens (2007: 71) is especially scathing when it comes to the malign

effects of religious texts: 'religion is not just amoral, but positively immoral....these faults and crimes are not to be found in the behavior of its adherents...but in its original precepts.'

Richard Dawkins (2006: 315), meanwhile, alerts his readers to the dangers of parents indoctrinating children with their religious beliefs, i.e. constructing religious demand.

Materialists, by contrast, have no truck with such notions. Secularists among them would scoff at the need to preach atheism: structural forces will automatically bring forth religious decline. The late Fred Halliday, a prominent materialist who worked on problems of nationalism in international society, exemplifies this stance. He explicitly drew on materialist theories of nationalism in writing about religion. In his view, holy texts serve as *à la carte* menus from which modern political elites choose the most attractive option. '[As a Jew] if you are in favour of peace with the Palestinians, you can cite the case of King David, who gave away land to the King of Sidon,' explains Halliday. 'Equally, if you are against making peace...you can find material in Deuteronomy 25, which enjoins war to the end, indeed the massacre of the Amalekites: if you consider Palestinians Amalekites, there is not further argument' (Halliday 2002).

Notice that Halliday makes the case for the fungibility of premodern religious messages in the face of modern elites' political and economic interests. The same constructionist argument is made with respect to the morphing content of 'jihad' in Islamic discourse. Here economic or foreign policy grievances, not discursive traditions, are held to underpin fundamentalism (Esposito 2002; Bonney 2004). In temporal terms, the exigencies of the present are the dog which wags the tail of history and culture, producing new interpretations, selections or inventions of the canon.

Symbolists would take issue with Halliday's instrumentalism. For them, religious structures and doctrines are highly durable over time and not subject to swift manipulation by

the political dictates of the present. They would counter that the content of premodern religious texts and theologies matters; that these come to be institutionalized in centers of religious learning and executed by religious networks at state or sub-state level. The reproduction of texts and sacralized commentaries by religious institutions ensures path-dependency and 'rootedness.' Vernacular practices, liturgies and rituals also count: they may be replicated through brotherhoods, associations, para-church organizations or even extended families. Attempts to radically reinvent, reinterpret or reform are constrained by existing understandings.

For symbolists, culture is not an epiphenomenon, but has its own independent logic. When it comes to Islamism, Monica Toft writes that the theological category of jihad as military duty survived - albeit as a minor chord - in Muslim thought in a way the category of crusade did not in Christianity after the Wars of Religion (Toft 2007). The meaning of jihad is a matter of debate between those who speak of it as spiritual or martial, offensive or defensive, and targeted at the 'near' or 'far' enemy. Still, symbolists contend that there are bounds of interpretation within which innovators are constrained (Firestone 2002; Cook 2005). Religious ideas do not change with the political wind but possess important endogenous momentum. Daniel Philpott adds that political theology, i.e. those aspects of religious doctrine that specify the relation between religion and the state, exert an important independent effect on political violence. Simply put, when it comes to politics and violence, 'Religion matters. Religions matter' (Philpott 2007: 515, 522).

Persistence or Decline?: Theories of Religious Reproduction

Having classified theories of religion as respectively materialist, symbolist and primordialist, it behooves us to do likewise for theories of religious reproduction, namely those dealing with questions of persistence and decline.

### *Materialist Theories of Secularization*

Most who bring a constructionist perspective to bear on religious reproduction point to material forces as an engine of change, hence secularization's association with modernization. For Norris and Inglehart (2004:13-17), rising income, education, safety and wealth obviate the need for supernatural sources of security and compensation. This echoes Marx's notion of religion as a 'haven in a heartless world' which will disappear when physical misery and alienation are alleviated through socialism (Marx and O'Malley [1843] 1970). Of course, Marx and his successors are somewhat janus-faced in their approach. At points religion appears as part of the structure of capitalist domination, at other moments as a haven for capitalism's oppressed, and elsewhere as a casualty of capitalism's restless churning. As Marx and Engels famously declare, capitalism uproots society such that 'all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life' (Marx and Engels [1848] 1998). Classical rational choice theory is similarly materialist. As society's center of gravity moves toward secularism, RCT predicts that the upwardly mobile will leave churches whose beliefs clash with those of the secular mainstream. Indeed, entire denominations are pushed in a secular direction as their membership moves up the social scale and demands a reduction of tension with the surrounding secular society (Stark and Bainbridge 1987: 279-302). The desire for material self-advancement propels individuals and churches toward an accommodation with secularism.

Though secularism is borne aloft on a rising material tide, economic development delivers complexity along with wealth. New economic and political institutions emerge in this differentiated world, breaking the monopoly of religion on individuals' *habitus*. These rising specialized structures and institutions surpass religion when it comes to catering to peoples' desire for material security, wealth, power and prestige. Ergo, education for its own sake, hospitals driven by a purely medical mission and a competitive leisure market attuned to consumer imperatives (Dobbelare 1979: 48). State and marketplace usurp religious functions. The law of comparative advantage drives economic specialization while differentiation of science and government move in lockstep, shrinking the sphere of the sacred. Religion retreats from public to private, and within the private sphere, to a narrow activity, one possible lifestyle choice among many (Bruce 2002: 9, 20). Powerful interests see to it that religious barriers to commerce and the reach of the state are swept aside. Disenchantment reigns as the instrumental rationality of the modern bureaucratic state takes over from the substantive moralism of a religio-centric order (Weber [1922]1978).

### *Symbolism and Secularization*

Symbolists, like materialists, hold that the demand for secular ideas is constructed. However, the mechanism of change is cultural rather than politico-economic. As with symbolist theories of religion, this vantage point stresses the embeddedness of cultural forms. Secularism, like religion, has an ancient - typically Greco-Roman - pedigree. It ebbs and flows in cycles, depending on the popularity of competing religious ideas and changes in patterns of institutionalization. Symbolism contends that secular ideas, like religions, are constrained by previous ideas. Islam built on Judaeo-Christian foundations, which in turn drew upon Hellenistic, Babylonian and Canaanite pagan models (Bainbridge and Stark 1985:



87). Similarly, without Socrates there could be no Galileo, and *sans* him no Spinoza, Voltaire, Darwin or Dawkins. Each new idea unfolds organically out of earlier forms.

There are two versions of symbolism in nationalism studies: a) a strong form in which interpretive frameworks are reproduced over generations as a cardinal group myth, reinforced by rituals, symbols and institutions (Armstrong 1982: 297; Smith 1986: 299); and b) a weak version whereby previous constructs and events serve as 'symbolic resources' (Zimmer 2003) or 'layers' (Hutchinson 2005) whose 'rediscovery' informs subsequent myth-making and constrains the scope for nationalists to invent traditions. The menu of symbolic resources is richer in some instances (i.e. Persians, Chinese) than others (i.e. Trinidadian Indians, Ulster Protestants, English Canadians), more xenophobically violent in some cases (i.e. Hutu) than in others, such as Albania (Kaufman 2001; Saideman and Ayres 2008).

When it comes to religious narratives, the fact that particular people (Muhammad, Jesus, Joseph Smith, Protestant martyrs) did things in specific places and times matters. Their trials and tribulations furnish symbolic resources that constrain and nudge the content of the messages that latter-day revivalists and fundamentalists propound (Kaufmann 2008). Since Islam was founded by Arabs, movement leaders in Arab-majority societies find it more difficult to ignore Muslim reference points than Turkish or Persian-majority nations. Hence no Arab figure has been remotely as dismissive of Islam as Ataturk or the Pahlavis. Messages which do not resonate with past constructions will fail: preaching about the martyrdom of Husayn to Saudis is futile whereas among Persians it is likely to strike a chord.

The same is true for secularism. Its western and East Asian origins render it more palatable to them than others. In Muslim states, for instance, secularism has few symbolic resources to draw upon. Averroes and Avicenna offer too thin a reed upon which to legitimate a secular politics. Even the Hellenic past of Egypt or Lebanon is too inchoate to be

useful. This is not a problem in the West, where a surfeit of resources can be mined by atheists. New Atheism's symbolic resources resonate with western audiences because its exemplars are considered integral to westerners' national and civilizational identities. Which explains the importance which New Atheists place on tracing their spiritual myths of descent to the classical world, and erecting a pantheon of heroes from Socrates and Galileo to Thomas Jefferson. Like Protestants celebrating their martyrs or Orthodox Christians their saints, atheists, too, engage in the cultural work of narrating a communal past (Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007). A.C. Grayling's recent 'secular bible' crafts a noble pedigree and communal history for atheism that stretches back to ancient Greece and China. It even comes wrapped in archaic prose, a time-hallowed patina which befits ideas of glorious lineage (Grayling 2011). Given this predilection, it would be odd for New Atheists to propound a materialist theory in which secularism is wholly modern.

Symbolists do not rule out the possibility of change, but this is evolutionary in nature, taking place over long periods. Secular ideas may gradually emerge, for instance, but will do so in the guise of transmuted forms of religion like Marxism, Utopian liberalism or Durkheimian secular nationalism (Gray 2007, ch. 2; Kedourie 1960). More recently, Charles Taylor, though disavowing what he calls a 'subtraction story' of secularization, chronicles the progressive evaporation of the mystical and sacred from the thinking of leading western philosophers. This is a story of incremental change, from polytheism to monotheism, Protestantism to deism, giving way, ultimately, to secular humanism, with each step taking care to resonate with previous ideas (Taylor 2007, 2009). Secularization is not inevitable on this logic: one could equally imagine postmodern/multicultural critiques of western secularism and science, or prosocial arguments for religion, as the inflection points for a new cycle in which elite ideas begin to gradually desecularize. Critically, in contrast to materialist theories, there is no secular watershed separating the modern and premodern periods.

Many writers on religion take after Taylor: in a venerable lineage which begins with Enlightenment figures like Voltaire and Comte and runs through to Bryan Wilson, they assert the importance of rationalist ideas in unseating religion (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 7-9). Mass religious decline, on this account, begins gradually among educated elites, subsequently percolating down to the masses via the expansion of secular education and mass media like television (Bell 1976: 54). In the process, people transfer their trust from religious authorities to scientific 'expert systems' (Giddens 1991).

### *Primordialist Theories of Secularization*

Is it possible to entertain a primordialist theory of secularization? As intimated earlier, cognitivist theories, which ground religion in mankind's pre-scientific attempt to explain the world, fit this bill. For cognitivists, the restless human quest to explain the world lies at the core of human nature. It first expresses itself as religion, and then, as the facts disprove religious claims, morphs into post-religious forms of scientific explanation (Tylor 1930; Horton 1967). Other primordialist theories are also in concert with secularization but treat secular ideologies as religions *sans la lettre*. For John Gray, 'religion expresses human needs that no change in society can remove...human beings will no more cease to be religious than they will stop being sexual, playful or violent' (Gray 2007: 294). He considers secular beliefs, such as the liberal faith in progress, to be the heirs of medieval millenarian creeds: expounding similar concepts of transcendence and immortality (Gray 2007: 39).

Table 3 summarizes the foregoing, attempting to assign contemporary theories to their most appropriate category. Naturally such an exercise will never be perfect since no conceptual tendency is composed entirely of monocausal absolutists. Table 3 therefore seeks only to identify the predominant emphasis within each school of thought.

**Table 3. Classifying Theories of Religion**

|                     |                                      | Constructionist  |   | Primordialist   |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|--|---|---|
|                     |                                      | Materialist  | Symbolist   |   |
| <b>Origins</b>      |                                      | Classical rational choice theory (RCT), Functionalism, Neo-Marxism             |   | Evolutionary Psychology (Emotivist and Cognitivist), Freudian, Supply-Side Theory, Human Development Theory |
| <b>Reproduction</b> | <i>Persistence or Revival</i>        | Political defence theory, Multiple modernities, Official religion/coercion     | Cultural Institutionalism, Cultural defence theory, Multiple modernities, Socialization | Supply-Side Theory, Emotivism   |
|                     | <i>Secularization (i.e. decline)</i> | Functional Differentiation, Human Development Theory, Neo-Marxism, Classic RCT | Ideological Evolution: Individualization, Rationalization, Egalitarianism               | Cognitivism   |

This flags some interesting patterns. First, most conceptions of the origins of religion are primordialist. Even neo-Marxists are attuned to religion's palliative psychological effects. Secularization theory is typically constructionist with respect to reproduction, but relatively agnostic about origins.

Any of our classifications can offer an explanation of both persistence and decline. Supply-side theory explains periodic religious decline as issuing from political control over the supply of religion. Nonetheless, it holds that religious revival and long-term persistence derive from mankind's primordial demand for it. Constructionist theories predict religious decline, but allow for its persistence if religion satisfies the secular imperative of reinforcing

ethno-political boundaries, thereby resulting in variation in the level of religious reproduction, viz. 'multiple modernities.'

### The Temporal Dimension

Classifying theories of religion in this way lets us ask whether we are concerned with origins or reproduction, and whether we have considered all causal aspects of our problematic. There is also the salutary effect of flagging the oft-neglected temporal dimension to theories of religion which is such a point of contention in nationalism studies (Özkirimli 2010). An all-encompassing constructionist theory is one in which religion, regardless of the original motivation behind it, declines in the modern period. 'Is secularization intrinsic or extrinsic to the modernization process,' asks Davie (2007: 247). Constructionists would answer 'intrinsic.' In other words, secularism is a defining feature of the modern age. This is only truly imaginable through the prism of materialist arguments that discern a sharp break in the modern period occurring due to the industrial, democratic and bureaucratic revolutions. Symbolist accounts counter that secularism is premodern, primordialists that it is prehistoric, in origin and thus extrinsic to modernity.

There are important differences between primordialist and the symbolist variant of the constructionist position. Primordialism maintains that religion will eternally persist because it is an outgrowth of our evolved psychological makeup. Symbolism claims that all but the newest religions are traditions which have been culturally institutionalized. They can decline or change, but only over very long periods of time. Moreover, there is no *telos* to this process: European society, for instance, could begin to evolve in a religious direction, or it could continue to secularize. A further distinction is that primordialism specifies that the substance of religion will persist, not its forms. Symbolism is more exacting: it is not religion per se, but

*particular* religions and even theologies that are durable. Even if they fall dormant, religious traditions deposit symbolic resources which may give birth to future revivals, much like the ethnic revival of Hebraic consciousness among twentieth century Zionists or ancient Hellenic consciousness among late eighteenth century Greek nationalists.

One could combine primordial and symbolist arguments, as Scott Atran, Clifford Geertz and many nationalism theorists do. Here the emotional content of symbols assists in their perpetuation. However, a symbolist, unlike a primordialist, accepts that a religious culture could morph into a secular one over the *longue durée*. Symbolists also allow that secular ideas, and/or those which cut against the grain of human nature, can persist for long periods. Arthur Stinchcombe (1968:117-18) distinguishes between cultures which persist in part because they address a psychological need, and those that survive because they are institutionalized by the powerful. Symbolists argue likewise: for the path-dependence of ideas, even if reinforced by state power (i.e. ancient Egypt, Soviet Union) rather than communicants' needs.

## Conclusion

It is often noted that while there is a clear typology for theories of nationalism, nothing of the kind exists for religion. Though a distinction is made between theories which predict religious decline and those which argue for its persistence, no epistemic taxonomy of paradigms based on the causes, effects and temporality of religion exists akin to what we find for nationalism. Yet religions, like nations and ethnic groups, are cultural communities. Religion should thereby prove amenable to a similar form of classification. This paper applies

categories from nationalism theory to religion. The *primordialist-constructionist* distinction is introduced as an ideal-typical way of making sense of the causes, effects and timing of religion and secularization. Next, contemporary theories of religion are mapped to a nine-part conceptual matrix which distinguishes primordialist and constructionist theories along the dimensions of origins versus reproduction, and, with regard to reproduction, parses arguments about persistence from those of decline. Finally, constructionism is decomposed into its *materialist* and *symbolist* forms.

Materialist accounts privilege economic and political sources of religious decline which arise in modernity while symbolists point to self-replicating cultural traditions as the key source of social power. Primordialists, by contrast, locate the motivation for religion's persistence in mankind's evolutionary psychology, which emerged in the prehistoric past. This religious need is held to override the periodic secularizing imperatives emanating from the material or cultural realm. Religion springs eternal, though its form may change. Primordialism is the only major theory to bridge explanations of origins with those of the reproduction of religion.

Arguments from nationalism theory stress that 'why' questions are inextricably lined to 'when' questions. So too in religion. Within constructionism, materialist theories consider secularizing processes to be modern and terminal for religion, while symbolist theories aver that periods of religiosity give way to those of secularism and vice-versa, in cyclical fashion. Religious traditions depend on elites, institutions and written texts to transmit effectively, hence they gain force only with the emergence of settled agricultural communities in the ancient world. Once formed and institutionalized, the content of religions cannot be easily manipulated for gain. Symbolist theories resemble primordialist ones in claiming that religious decline is nothing new, while the political and economic transformations of modernity are not revolutionary. However, symbolists would accept the possibility of long

periods of secularization whereas primordialists would not. Finally, symbolists argue for the durability of particular religious traditions while primordialists only hold that the universal substance, not the form, of religion endures.

In making sense of a diverse and growing range of explanations, this map of conceptual space can help point researchers to the full range of questions that may be asked, and the analytical tools with which to answer them, when interpreting real-world data. It is hoped that this novel arrangement of theories of religion can open up new vistas for further research. For instance, we might ask whether there could be a symbolist account of the origins of religion or whether more attention could be paid to symbolic and instrumentalist processes of religious reproduction. The typology also begs the question of why theories of origins often remain detached from those of reproduction. Few constructionists claim, as they do with respect to nations, that religion is a modern invention. Instead, most sociological theories of religion treat its origins as a subject of anthropological and antiquarian interest, distinct from its contemporary reproduction. It may well be argued that explanations of religion's origins should be integrated with theories of its reproduction to provide a consistent, rounded account - and that this omission represents a weakness in much contemporary theory.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The few exceptions would include Roger Petersen, Pierre van den Berghe and Frank Salter. Those who accept aspects of primordialism suggest that it acts to provide a reservoir of sentiment that requires environmental stress to become actualized. In this sense, evolutionary psychology affects the salience of, but not the form of, identity.

<sup>2</sup> The radical constructionist approach is evident, for example, in the work of Rogers Brubaker and Jon Fox, which questions the 'groupist' assumptions of scholars on nationalism. See Brubaker (2006). A good summary of the trend toward a blend of perspectives is provided by Comaroff and Stern (1994: 39).

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<sup>3</sup> Some argue that a secular separation of church and state empowers religion in private. Yet this is to admit that religion has lost power in the public realm, a loss which may or may not be recouped by gains in the private sphere.

<sup>4</sup> Berman allows that goods can be spiritual, or even collective, so is not a rational choice theorist in the classical sense described here.

<sup>5</sup> It is possible to reconcile multiple modernities theory with primordialism if cross-country variation is explained in terms of differing levels of environmental stimuli which call forth variations in the strength of religious response.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of the affective theory of religion of Malinowski, Robert Marrett, William McDougall and David Hume, see Riesebrodt 2010: 57-60.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of an emotional regime refers to the societal norms which regulate when, and under which social circumstances, specific emotions can be expressed. For more, see Reddy 2001.