

The Intertwining Trajectories of Religion and Economic Development

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Leading social thinkers of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud – all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society. During the last decade, however, this thesis of the slow and steady death of religion has come under growing criticism. Critics point to multiple indicators of religious health and vitality today, ranging from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States to the emergence of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs. Prominent critics suggest it is time to bury the secularization thesis. There is no question that the traditional secularization thesis needs updating. It is obvious that religion has not disappeared from the world, nor does it seem likely to do so. Nevertheless, the concept of secularization captures an important part of what is going on. As this talk will demonstrate:

1. The publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past fifty years. Nevertheless,
2. The world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before-- and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population.