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The Racial Politics of Secularity: Rethinking African-American Religiosity  
Through New Paradigms in Secularization Theory

Diana Christine Brown

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

### The Racial Politics of Secularity: Rethinking African-American Religiosity Through New Paradigms in Secularization Theory

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Revisions to secularization theory over the past two decades call for reconceptualization of the relation between race and secularity. Structural theories—depicting secularization as the linear, straightforward decline of religion in modernity—commonly explain the tenacity of African-American religiosity as resulting from their marginalization in modern society, a product of educational and economic disparities. However, recent theories address the secular as a historically contingent, incidental phenomenon, what has been called an “accomplishment”; it merits substantive study in itself, carrying the distinct values, beliefs, and understandings of a particular social history. This new framework invites analysis of the racial assumptions embodied in mainstream US secularity as explanation for blacks’ religiosity, rather than citing their structural exclusion alone. This research attempts such through ethnographic analysis of black and white young adults’ discussion of their religious and spiritual identities, using interviews conducted in Wave 4 of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Finding that most white young adults pursue autonomy from family and community as means of establishing credible identity, and that most black young adults facilitate identity by showing fidelity to them, I argue that these differences demonstrate racialized understandings of human agency, personhood, and social structure that vividly persist in the 21st century United States. Yet those of white young adults are typically treated as normative both in sociological discussions of secularity as well as in broader Western culture, with costly political consequences.

Key Words: secularization, secularity, race, religion, Charles Taylor, Talal Asad

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENTS IN SECULARIZATION THEORY .....	7
Orthodox, Counter-Orthodox, and Revisionist Paradigms .....	7
Charles Taylor’s Revisionist Approach to Secularity.....	19
A Taylorean Reading of Trends in Religious Affiliation .....	28
CHAPTER 2: RETHINKING RACE AND SECULARITY .....	36
Talal Asad and the Political Project of Secularity .....	36
Orthodox Explanations for African-American Religiosity.....	39
Possible Revisionist Readings of African-American Religiosity .....	45
CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS .....	53
Description of Data.....	53
Description of Methods .....	57
CHAPTER 4: WHITE YOUNG ADULTS .....	62
Overview.....	62
The Religiously Disaffected .....	64
The Religiously Conflicted.....	70
The Religiously Devout .....	75
Summary.....	80
CHAPTER 5: AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUNG ADULTS.....	82
Overview.....	82

The Religious Stalwarts .....	85
The Religious Strayers.....	91
Summary.....	95
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION .....	97
Review and Discussion.....	97
Weaknesses, Limitations, and Ideas for Further Research .....	102
REFERENCES .....	105

## THE RACIAL POLITICS OF SECULARITY: RETHINKING AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGIOSITY THROUGH NEW PARADIGMS IN SECULARIZATION THEORY

While hosting a debate between a white atheist and a white Christian on his talk show in 2013, the African-American comedian W. Kamau Bell remarked that he felt inordinately out of place in the conversation on account of his race, jesting, “As a black guy, I can’t not believe in God. I’d wake up in the morning, ‘I’m black and there’s no God?’ I’m going back to sleep” (Mehta 2013: par. 2). Later in the show, he teased, “Atheism is like the highest level of white privilege, it’s like having a black belt in white privilege” (Mehta 2013: par. 3). More than the brazen exposition of atheism, it seems it was the purpose of the debate itself—quarrelling over reasons to believe in god—that according to Bell, contrasted with ways that African-Americans tend to approach faith. His comments speak to a religious life where belief is something of a collective historical imperative, more than a private, rational choice among an array of options.

Religious pluralism has long been considered a key instigator of secularization. Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* (1969) famously asserts that religious claims about reality have lost their plausibility in Western modernity under its hand. Supposedly, skepticism was previously the domain of elites, but industrialization and globalism have brought the heterogeneous masses of the world in frequent proximity with each other, such that even “the man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance” (127). The latest wave of research on secularization severely challenges the universal scope of this claim, but often reiterates the weakened plausibility of belief in the West. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor defines secularity not as a decline in religious belief, but changed

conditions of belief. During the past 500 years, the North Atlantic West has undergone a transition “from a society where belief in God [was] un-challenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (2007: 3). Taylor claims that while religious pluralism does not necessarily produce secularization, it has contributed to massive changes in the feel of religion for modern Westerners. Now, diverse religious beliefs exist in untamable friction with each other, the transcendent seems perpetually elusive and the immanent perpetually haunted. All beliefs are fragilized beside others.

But if these fragilized conditions of belief are a defining feature of the North-Atlantic world, the Bell’s TV banter raises the question whether these conditions are not heavily racialized. Though certainly overstating the case for humor’s sake, the contrast he illustrates strikes right at the heart of the secularization argument, observing that at the same point in history that the beliefs of white atheists and white Christians live in inescapable debate with each other, whether literal or imagined, African-Americans’ belief in God is as necessary to life as breathing. Or at least, belief is so pervasive among them that Bell gets laughs with this imagery.

More than a popular notion, the vibrancy of black religiosity and the marginal status of black secularity have been widely corroborated in demographic trends. Pew Research Forum has stated that “While the U.S. is generally considered a highly religious nation, African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole, including level of affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer and religion’s importance in life” (“A Religious Portrait” 2009: par. 1). Even the most unchurched blacks are more religious than unchurched peers of other race/ethnic groups. Unaffiliated blacks far exceed those of other ethnicities in belief in God, heaven, hell, and human

evolution, and in saying that religion is very important in their lives (“Racial and Ethnic” 2017). A full 78% of unaffiliated blacks are “fairly certain” or “absolutely certain” they believe in God, while only 44% of whites say the same, and 41% of unaffiliated blacks pray daily, while only 15% of whites do. Blacks are the only racial/ethnic minority whose proportion of the unaffiliated did not increase between 2007 and 2014 (“America’s Changing” 2015) (“Racial and Ethnic” 2017). Most growth among the unaffiliated is purportedly accounted for by generational replacement among white Protestant and Catholic churches, who have seen huge drops in affiliation among Millennials; meanwhile, the ranks of the Black Protestant Church have remained remarkably stable, retaining its share of 16 million of the US population (“America’s Changing” 2015) (Lipka 2015).

The point need not be that secularity does not exist among African-Americans, but that as a whole they seem less susceptible to following trends of secular affiliation and belief than non-black Americans. Why might this be? Accounting for such differences was more hastily handled by previous paradigms of secularization theory, which treated secularization as a straightforward, linear decline in religious belief directly coinciding with modernization. From this paradigm, those groups who have remained more religious than others were assumed to simply be farther back in the timeline of secularization than others by virtue of being “on the margins of modern industrial society” (Berger 1969: 108). This included African-Americans and other minority races, women, rural dwellers, and the working class. With hindered access to the privileges of modern life, including higher education, occupational perks and prestige, cosmopolitan city life, etc., such groups were supposedly also less vulnerable to the knowledge and experiences thought to threaten religious faith. And yet, they could all be expected to catch up, provided economic and educational disparities were ameliorated. Thus, racial differences in secularization, like



differences in gender, class, region, and place of residence, amounted to nothing more than differing speeds of modernization.

But this paradigm for thinking about secularization is severely outdated. Taking a stridently structural approach, it assumes secularization to be an axiomatic product of history, or a universal trend that necessarily sweeps societies as they modernize. In contrast, recent work addresses the secular as a contingent, incidental concept, what James. K. A. Smith, drawing upon Charles Taylor's work, calls a historical "accomplishment" (2014: 26). Secularity is no longer taken as an empty, negative marker connoting the mere absence of religion, but rather as a category with content, encasing assumptions, values, and views regarding religion and human personhood that emerge from a specific social, historical context.

Sociological explanations of secularization are only beginning to adjust to the parameters set by these theoretical insights. The major charge for scholars is now not simply to *detect* secularization but to *describe* "secularity" as a substantive social phenomenon, including the historical context giving rise to it. The task is to answer Taylor's question, "What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?" (2007: 1). Some respond to question by carefully delineating the geographic or national locale under examination in order to avoid unjustifiable generalizations, acknowledging as much variation in the forms and flavors of secularity as it appears in France, Egypt, and the United States as there might be to religious life in these places. Expanding upon this revisionist framework, some further claim that secularity is a thoroughly Western construction which needs to be understood in terms of the West's modernist political project, developed at the expense of other societies. Anthropologist Talal Asad notoriously declares secularity to be a "political doctrine [that] arose in modern Euro-America" that has justified dehumanizing and even violent treatment of Islamic societies (2003: 1). Though ostensibly "humanist" in its aim, secularity silently encodes stipulations

regarding human agency and personhood that reinforce the power and dominance of European culture.

This perspective brings a burden of explanation on scholars of secularity in the United States, given the nation's tumultuous history with race. It is broadly acknowledged that African-Americans' religious collectivities have been shaped and propelled by racially-motivated political practices. Resulting theological and sociological distinctions of African-American religion are such that their trajectory has long been assessed as unique within broader religious trends in the United States, including and perhaps especially trends attributed to growing secularity, suggesting that the latter may presume a racially-specific lived experience. It seems indisputable that American secularity, like its religion, is poignantly colored by racial tensions—and yet secularity is seldom addressed as such, in sociological literature. This oversight effectively leads to reinforcement of white experiences and understandings as normative in studies of secularization and perpetuates an impoverished understanding of contemporary race issues. America's racial context, along with the regional context, needs to be engaged in studies of secularization.

My research offers an overview of secularization literature coupled with a critique of its handling of race. This overview is followed by an ethnographic analysis, using interviews conducted by the National Study of Youth and Religion, to describe black and white young adults' understandings of self, family, and community as they relay their religious upbringings. I point out sites of variance between black and white young adults' understandings and argue that this variance discernibly reflects a racialized experience of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States. White young adults tend to see themselves as autonomous, deliberating agents, impelled to construct a self-made spiritual identity through rigorous moral and intellectual scrutiny of their experiences. Meanwhile, black young adults tend to see themselves as inherently bound to a multi-generational, dialogic religious community, impelled to demonstrate stalwart loyalty to this heritage. In the former, belief is primarily a matter of personal judgment, subject to distanced, skeptical critique like Taylor and

Berger describe. In the latter, belief functions as a shared project, pivoting on relational as well as rational terms, and seems heavily unrepresented in Taylor and Berger's cognitive, individualistic approaches.

Such differences illustrate how racialized lived experience can either impede or encourage development of secular identity, or at least the type secular identity most common in the United States. As W. Kamau Bell playfully observed, the quarreling religious debate assumed to be broadly-significant and religiously-defining among those living within geographic and national boundaries of the United States apparently speaks from a predominantly white and non-black experience of life.

## CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENTS IN SECULARIZATION THEORY

### *Orthodox, Counter-Orthodox, and Revisionist Paradigms*

The concept of secularization lies at the heart of sociological thinking. If a rough consensus between Comte, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber can be raised, it might say that the structural and organizational features of modern social life had been and would continue to be “profoundly disruptive of patterns of life that had existed for centuries all over Europe,” with fatal consequences for religion (Davie 2013: 92). Such features included capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, individualism, popular and political endorsement of “reason” and science, and rationalization. These each entailed massive shifts in the function and solidity of human society, and of what it means to be a human person. Both in response to and as part of this shift, sociological theory attempted to explain what binds human beings together in a historical situation where religion appeared no longer sufficient to the task (or at least, did so differently than before). Underlying such theory is a conceptualization of human persons as fundamentally social beings, prior to their being religious beings.<sup>1</sup> This fact had allegedly been concealed by the longstanding prestige of religious understandings of humanity, but supposedly, modern structural developments have gradually chipped away at religion’s persuasive power to unveil this fact of human character.

Because this premise lies at the core of their work, each of the classical theorists are key contributors to what has been termed the Orthodox paradigm of secularization theory, which simply put, supposes that the social developments of modernity inevitably result in a decline of religion’s social influence (Mckenzie 2017:10). This paradigm is heavily objectivist in that it treats secularization as causally related to structural changes in modern society and not, for

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<sup>1</sup> Unless all religion is subsumed under the sociological, as it is in Durkheim’s work (2012).

instance, as a distinct interpretive experience of these structural changes. Summarizing the claims of Orthodox secularization theory, Mckenzie writes,

Religion has lost its significance at the level of society, organizations and individuals. In regard to the social system, and due to a number of factors pertaining to the advent of modernity... governments no longer need religious legitimation; members of society no longer need religious theology/theodicy since they have access to alternative meaning-bearing systems; and religion has become a less plausible explanation of man and the universe. Religion has lost its monopoly on meaning, while non-religious agencies now take care of many activities once performed by religious organizations. Religious pluralism drastically erodes personal religious commitment. (2017: 22)

From the start, the Orthodox paradigm exalted the European experience as universal, developed long before the concept of “multiple modernities” held viable weight (Eisenstadt 2000). Europe was frequently portrayed as the farthest, most progressed along a universal trajectory for human societies, holding a superior status relative to others across to the globe and to its own previous eras. Karl Marx and Auguste Comte are notorious for promoting this view, unequivocally optimistic that the transformations occurring in modern Europe would usher in the most advanced, enlightened stage humanity had yet seen. Both envisioned science as a powerful, revolutionary enabler of human progress and religion as a hindrance to it, hence why secularization was depicted as a necessary condition of modernization. Science and reason would render humans free from the superstitions and irrationality of previous stages of history, especially those promulgated by religion. For Comte these stages were characterized by intellectual progression: there was a “kind of knowledge proper to each period, as well as the human faculties predominant in them,” and secularization would enable the heights of

knowledge to be reached. Marx foresaw primarily material, not intellectual change, the stages characterized by economic “modes of production, which define a particular set of social structures” (Mckenzie 2017: 8). For Marx, secularization was crucial to shedding religious illusions which had historically perpetuated the proletariat’s state of alienation. Secularization would also enable the creation of technologies that would render them free from the coercive constraints of their subordinate economic position.

Max Weber and Emile Durkheim also linked modernization with secularization, yet their work treats secularization as a necessary byproduct of modernization rather than a necessary condition for it. If for Marx and Comte, secularization foregrounded and enabled the move towards human progress, Weber and Durkheim believed that as modernization occurred, religion fell by the wayside. The latter pair was indubitably more ambivalent about the effects of secularization on human society, noting a mixed bag of outcomes. Weber writes of the modern world’s disenchantment and marginalization of the religious sphere, which occurred as unintended consequences of the standardizing, bureaucratizing impulses of rational capitalism. In deliberate opposition to Marx, he argued that secularization came about through an ironic evolution of Protestant religious thought, transforming economic life from a value-oriented to an efficiency-oriented logic (2011). As a result, modern western society had accidentally locked itself into the cold, meaningless, instrumental logic of the economy. Secularity was not, therefore, a celebratory rejection of religion but a bitter reality to accept. Durkheim was concerned about the social effects of secularization, as well. Observing that the turn to science and the separation of church and state had disempowered religion in Europe, Durkheim predicted that modernity would leave individuals bereft of a collective sacred order to ground human life (2012). Unless new religious forms appeared, modern persons would be left

vulnerable to “anomie”, a disoriented and dysfunctional state of being resulting from a fragmented social context.

While Weber and Durkheim may have left room for the possibility of religious revival<sup>2</sup>, their work has been used alongside that of Marx and Comte to stress the indelible link between modernization and secularization, an inevitable and irreversible change that sweeps over modern societies as they undergo certain structural and cultural transitions—often treated as advancements. In this, there is an invisible yet powerful valorization of the Western situation. The societal struggles informing the West are generalized, assumed to apply universally to all human societies; if the comparison does not immediately appear justifiable, then this is because the other societies are far behind, and can be expected to face them in the future. The only way in which the particularity of Western society is directly engaged is in acknowledging its uniquely-sophisticated status relative to other societies; meanwhile, the specific philosophical and anthropological contours of its secular culture are presented as neutral, universal, and transcending social context. Put differently, secularization was treated as being absent human culture, secularization the process of shedding human culture, and thus the European situation was presented as the climax of human history, whether in triumphant or melancholic tenors.

This has justified the patronizing descriptions of societies outside the West, including the “premodern” European society, which almost invariably pervades Orthodox theory. Each of the core theorists have received heavy criticism on this point. Whether via Durkheim’s scientific classifications of primitive and modern religious forms or through Marx’s progressive economic vision, secularization was treated as a feature of more advanced, enlightened, mature

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<sup>2</sup> Weber’s ontology is decidedly not deterministic, and accounts for the causal force of individual meanings and motivations on social structures, and Durkheim explores new forms of the sacred that might emerge in modernity.

societies, best exemplified by Europe. Others were considered to be simply further behind in the process of modernization. More than merely providing an explanatory account for global diversity, this illustration reinforced Europe's confidence in the narrative and values implicit in its emerging secular mindset. As Charles Taylor writes, in the standard outlook of European secularity, "our understanding of ourselves and where we stand is partly determined by our sense of having come to where we are, of having over-come a previous condition" (2007: 28).

Orthodox secularization theory took on a unique level of empirical formality in the latter half of the 20th century, coinciding with the fashion to use positivistic methodologies in sociology (Hughes & Sharrock 2007). In 1967, Peter Berger published *The Sacred Canopy*, which simultaneously accomplished two vital tasks: 1) it provided a cohesive theory of the interpretive process by which structural changes in modernity promote disbelief among individuals, and 2) it framed secularization in terms befitting empirical measurement, allowing the secularization topic to stake its ground in mainstream sociological debates (Mckenzie 2017).

*The Sacred Canopy* attempts to solve a puzzle in Orthodox theory, by describing how the individual, interpretive experiences of doubt and disbelief are related to the ostensibly distant and impersonal social structure. According to Berger, all social knowledge, including religious knowledge, is socially-constructed. Individuals believe that which is consistently reinforced by the persons and institutions surrounding them. This is why the changes to the social structure in modernity—namely industrialization, urbanization, and globalization—have been devastating for religion, as they have brought diverse peoples and cultures in contact with each other. According to Berger, religious pluralism punctures the taken-for-granted character of religious knowledge in a given society. Once acting as a "sacred canopy" over human life, unquestioned and interwoven into the background fabric of reality, it has become subject to



conscious, critical scrutiny in the wake of such diversity, making religious beliefs permanently less plausible. Berger claims that secularization results in areas where there is greater religious pluralism; insofar as modernizing developments increase religious pluralism, secularization coincides with modernization. This precise targeting of social mechanisms that cause unbelief put secularization theory in terms that could be empirically tested, spurring a frenzy of positivistic studies attempting to objectively measure whether, how, and where it was occurring. This approach remained in vogue through the 1990's and early 2000's (Mckenzie 2017).

Yet the empirical project did not proceed as planned. It produced plenty of data that severely complicated, if not contradicted, the claims of Orthodox secularization theory. Partly in response to countervailing evidence, a Counter-Orthodox paradigm emerged in secularization studies. Noting that the United States was both a site of vibrant religious diversity as well as intense religiosity, Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Laurence Iannaccone, and others refuted Berger's thesis that pluralism leads to religious decline and argued the opposite case: religious fervor was actually increasing in modernity as a result of thriving market competition between religious denominations (Finke & Stark 2006; Iannaccone 2010). Taking as a starting point an understanding of human beings as self-interested, strategic actors, the Counter-Orthodox paradigm portrays churches and congregants operating via supply-demand relational dynamics. That American religion has been characterized by greater spiritual seeking and denominational-switching is because religious pluralism has heightened the competition, not because people are less prone to believe. Spiritual seekers are engaged in "the rational search for 'other-worldly rewards'" (their explicit definition of religion), and denominations feel they are in crisis only because they are under pressure to adapt to market demands, stoking the flames of religious fervor with the ever-expanding promises of otherworldly rewards that fund religious appeal

(Stark & Finke 2002). In their view, secularization indicates only that a particular religious organization has been isolated from the competition or has failed to accommodate its market.

Though the Counter-Orthodox is purportedly opposed to the Orthodox paradigm, it maintains the objectivist, empirical methodology as well as a structural, linear construal of history, and these have proved to be the downfall for both paradigms. First, both face the persistent challenge of identifying comprehensive, reliable, yet specific measures for religious phenomena. The definition of religion is a perpetually-unsettled matter among scholars, as definitions inevitably exclude much of what is commonly considered religious and include much that isn't. There is thus little agreement about whether religion is best measured by self-reported beliefs, particular practices such as prayer or church attendance, or the presence of religious language in public speech, to name a few examples. When a study's method, measure, and implicit definition of religion are suspect, its claims regarding the increase or decrease of religion are highly disputed. Berger's targeting of religious pluralism as a mechanism for secularization convinced many that measuring religious diversity could work as a proxy measure for secularization, beginning decades of tussles between Orthodox and Counter-Orthodox secularization theorists before this measure, too, would prove inadequate and defective. A 2002 article demonstrated that the typical measures of religious pluralism used in these studies were based on a mathematically faulty formula such that, "nearly all evidence that has been assembled on both sides of the pluralism debate" would have to be entirely reconsidered (Voas, Olsen, & Crockett 2002: 213). It seems rather than reconsidering, most have become exhausted with the attempt. Sociologist Christian Smith (2008) summarizes how the pervasive problem of measurement has significantly depleted sociological interest in the secularization debate, even after Berger's invigoration of the field:

The arguments, which were frequently contentious, mobilized many forms of individual-, congregational-, county- and national-level data to try to determine whether religious pluralism increased or decreased religious adherence, whether religious competition energized or undermined religious mobilization, whether religious beliefs were eroding or maintaining stable levels, and so on. The debate produced a lot of important and valuable research and we are that much the more knowledgeable for it. But, by my reading, that debate has lost most of its energy. (1562)

Yet the weightier argument for Berger's claims is probably that his linear reading of history simply does not fit the breadth and diversity of modern religious life. Relatedly, the primary point of downfall for the Orthodox and Counter-Orthodox paradigms is that their theoretical conceptualizations of religion, history, and human personhood have proved far too narrow to be useful as explanations. As the Counter-Orthodox paradigm discovered, religion is not simply declining in modernity. In addition to the persistence of religion in the West and particularly the United States, the late 20th-century rise of Evangelicalism in the Global South and in Asia surprised many sociologists—even Berger, who recanted his earlier predictions of secularization and in 1999 admitted that, “The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” (2). The field has grown to accept that there are multiple ways that urbanization, industrialization, and other modernizing changes can relate to religion—that modernity does not encompass a singular path for all human societies. And yet the Counter-Orthodox paradigm's equally-narrow reading of history also has severe blind spots; religion has indeed diminished in significance in certain regions where it would be expected to thrive, based on market theory. Not only failing to account for these situations, the Counter-Orthodox paradigm is deemed ill-suited as a general theory of religion by

many sociologists for reducing inherently social matters of tradition, heritage, and culture solely to individual rational choice.

Because of these problems, today there are very few experienced sociologists of religion who defend either Orthodox or Counter-Orthodox secularization theory in their strict formats.<sup>3</sup> The Revisionist paradigm within which they now work generally agrees with Orthodox secularization theory that massive transformations have occurred in the modern religious landscape, but see secularization as precisely this--a *transformation*--rather than linear increase or decline—and a regionally particular one, at that. The questions have largely shifted from quantitative to qualitative form, inquiring as to what this transformation consists of. Close-ended questions--“Is secularization occurring?”—have given way to theoretical, open ended questions: “What is secularity?”, “How is secularity socially defined?”, and “How do secularity and religion inform each other?” Revisionist scholars frequently employ historical, philosophical, and anthropological analysis to answer these questions, rather than empirical methods alone. Though there are diverse voices in this field, they tend to be similarly critical of Orthodox secularization theory for 1) casting as objective, inevitable, and inexorable forces certain features of secularity that are shown to be contingent on particular historical context, events, and actions, 2) overstating and universalizing the case of the modern West to other parts of the world, and 3) emphasizing structural change at the expense of understanding how the lived experience of human persons effects and allows these changes. Counter-Orthodox theory is also charged with these problems, in addition to its economic reductionism.

Sociologists Nancy Ammerman and Grace Davie exemplify both the strengths and weaknesses of current sociology of religion informed by a revisionist paradigm. Both creatively

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Bruce remains a staunch defender of the Orthodox theory (2015).

investigate the intricate and unexpected forms religion takes in the lives of modern Americans and Europeans. Davie concurs with previous research reporting that formal religion among the masses is exceedingly uncommon—most Europeans shirk regular religious practice and seldom incorporate religious belief in everyday thinking. Still, she finds among them a potent form of “vicarious religion”, premised on the popular notion that the few persons who devote their whole selves to the religious life absolve the masses from such responsibility. Thus, Europeans are still willing to pay taxes to support their country’s religious institutions. They also continue to patron religious services and rituals for births, funerals, and weddings. That religion is valued as a kind of public utility demonstrates that even quintessentially-secular European culture maintains a significant place for religion. Davie is a proponent of rich qualitative work on religion to answer the oversight of objectivist approaches, which look primarily at discrete measures of church attendance or reported belief. She writes, “It is easy enough both to measure and to take note of the part of the iceberg that emerges from the water. But this is to ignore the mass underneath, which is invisible most of the time--but without which the visible part would not be there at all” (Ammerman 2007: 28).

Ammerman argues against the polemics of secularization theory in her study *Congregations and Community* (1997). Though it is true traditional forms of collective worship have dissipated and widespread agreement regarding religious belief cannot be taken for granted in urban environments, she argues that congregational religious worship nevertheless has emerged as a vibrant and valuable source of social networking, social capital, and fostering identity in modern urban life. Congregations are communities that, “are neither the ‘lifestyle enclaves’ of individualistic religious consumers nor traditionalistic throwbacks to an earlier time” but rather creations of the modern world that rely upon both individual choice to join them

and a sense of sacred, social solidarity to sustain them (1997: 352). Unwavering in her refusal to cave to the terms of either Orthodox and Counter-Orthodox approaches, Ammerman writes,

It seems to me that the persistent positing of dichotomies--individualism versus community, for instance--has hindered our ability to understand both modern urban life and the role of religion. By beginning with evolutionary assumptions (that tradition inevitably gives way to modernity), our theoretical models have too often been unidirectional and unilinear. More of one meant less of the other. With each step along the way, more of traditional, communal, and religious life is left behind, to be replaced only by the modern, rational, world of strangers described by modernization theories. Yet we know that this story is not unilinear. It does not begin at a fixed point in time and proceed inexorably toward the present. Historian Thomas Bender points out that if we were to believe every historian who has written about community breakdown in the United States, we would not know whether to place the critical turning point in the 1650s, 1690s, 1740s, 1780s, 1820s, 1850s, 1880s, or 1920s. (More recent observers would surely add the 1960s to that list.) A unilinear evolutionary story does not fit our history very well. (1997: 350).

Both Davie and Ammerman employ empirical sociological methods to make innovative claims about religion in modern societies; but they consistently point to the need for a deep theoretical renewal within the sub-discipline, of which their own work barely scratches the surface. Indeed, the Revisionist paradigm of secularization theory is deceptively named if it is thought to be merely an adjustment to the Orthodox paradigm. Given that objectivist understandings of secularization have been built into sociological thinking from the start, the mounting consensus that they do not sufficiently grasp the modern religious landscape requires a

re-working of the whole discipline, which most sociologists are ill-equipped and ill-disposed to do. Though many will acknowledge the problem, their work still largely relies on definitions and methodologies informed by the objectivist approach, carrying philosophically and empirically unsustainable assumptions about religion, human personhood, and human society. As Christian Smith has explained, the sociology of religion in general and especially the study of secularization has dwindled due to a mismatch between the empirical religious landscape and the questions, methods, and theories that guide inquiry of it.

There are, however, scholars on the margins of the discipline who are doing just the type of work Ammerman, Davie, Smith, and others call for. There are many reasons why scholars such as Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, David Martin, and Jose Casanova remain marginal to mainstream sociology of religion, one of which is that they tend to draw broadly from philosophical, anthropological, historical, as well as sociological approaches, and their interdisciplinary style makes them inaccessible and often unappealing to scholars with strictly sociological or empirical training, seeking to publish in like-minded journals. But more than this, by problematizing its taken-for-granted assumption that humans are, in their originary condition, necessarily social but not necessarily religious beings, these scholars directly challenge the discipline's theoretical self-justifications. Accepting their insight would require rethinking sociology's basic ontological premises and subsequently, the relationship between sociological data and the political and economic institutions that employ it for various aims. Nevertheless, the field of scholarship that substantively studies secularity provides vital understanding of the historical social contexts which birthed the many complexities of the contemporary religious landscape, including the sociological study of religion and secularization itself. The next section will explore the work of Charles Taylor, one of the most lauded of the Revisionist thinkers of

secularity. It demonstrates the new theoretical parameters within which sociology of religion can continue to be conducted, resolving many of the tensions and roadblocks of its previous theoretical paradigms

*Charles Taylor's Revisionist Approach to Secularity*

Charles Taylor's hefty work of political, sociological, and philosophical history, *A Secular Age* (2007) provides perhaps the most comprehensive articulation of the constructivist turn in secularization theory—that is, the shift away from empirical questions about whether or not secularization is objectively occurring to deep examination of “the secular” as it is interpreted in everyday life within the specific region it emerged—the North Atlantic West. He is thoroughly and explicitly interested in the lived experience of persons. His anthropology assumes human beings are fundamentally interpretive creatures, whose religious orientations are not reducible to objective social constraints. *A Secular Age* thus does not declare with finality the status of religion in modernity based on observation of its social structure, but offers rich description of the tensions, cross-pressures, and challenges regarding religion that Western individuals face as they interpret the world—including distinct new ways of understanding human personhood, community, religious authority, etc. Ultimately, Taylor concludes that to live in this secular age does not mean that religion is insignificant in everyday life, but that religious questions are perpetually unsettled. Religious belief has not disappeared, but it is fragilized within these new conditions for belief.

This is fundamentally a different kind of argument from those of more traditional secularization scholars, whose work typically entails mapping causal relations between modern societal changes and consequences for religion. Their approach involves taking “some feature of modernization, like urbanization, or industrialization, or the development of class society, or the



rise of science/technology, and see them as working steadily to undermine and sideline religious faith” (434). But Taylor does not think secularization is necessary to any of these developments. These exact structural features of modernization could, and indeed in many parts of the world do, entail other consequences for faith than what they have had in the North Atlantic world. Taylor emphatically insists that lived, interpretive experience in a secular age is not a derivative result of structural transformations; indeed, these structural transformations have only had a secularizing impact because human personhood and human flourishing first came to be conceivable and experienced outside religious bounds. As a critique to Orthodox secularization theory, this argument is subtle; Taylor is not saying that significant structural changes did not occur or that they have not had secularizing effects, only that the changes and their effects are contingent upon a given interpretive context. Throughout the book, again and again, Taylor shows how these classic changes to the modern social structure interweave and depend upon crucial shifts in the social imaginaries of human societies—that is, taken-for granted understandings of what is real, what it means to be human, what human goods consist of, etc.

Though this will be only a brief summary, I will now explain the content of Taylor’s analysis with substantive detail, as it answers, exposes, and weaves together the historical social context of religion with the empirical perplexities that secularization studies have encountered.

A *Secular Age* begins with the question: “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” (2007: 25). A common answer supposes this is the case because science has refuted the existence of supernatural spirits, demons, and forces, it has also shown that God is no longer plausible in our disenchanted world. Science now provides both explanations for human origins as well as technological innovations designed to enhance human comfort, two central

human longings that myths of God and religious worship formerly provided. Taylor finds this thesis an unhistorical reading of the scientific endeavor—which in its early modern developments was viewed as consonant with, and not in contradiction to, religious knowledge. Additionally, this thesis neglects the pivotal shifts in understandings of human personhood that would enable it to arise in the first place.

In 1500, it was impossible to divide the self from external forces in the manner that this thesis assumes. Speaking of lived experience--the taken for granted feel of life, and not our explicit self-descriptions—Taylor explains that humans in 1500 were “porous” creatures, which is to say that “people had an enchanted view of the universe; that is, saw us human beings as in a field of spirits, some of whom were malign” (27). As porous selves, humans could be cursed or healed, possessed by spirits and liberated from them; there was no way to separate mind or body from the world in which they dwelled. Hence, individuals did not own so much as participate in knowledge.

Through several winding, complex social tensions and events, modern Western humans have become “buffered selves,” wherein “the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual elan is what we call minds, the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans... and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, etc., are situated ‘within’ them.” (30). As buffered selves, it becomes possible to say we don’t believe in spirits, demons, gods, or anything supernatural. This is because we have come to take ourselves as fundamentally insular, self-contained units in the world; humans no longer experience themselves as vulnerably embedded in a world of powerful external forces beyond their control. This shift in the experiential conditions of our existence preceded our capacity to imagine that supernatural forces did not exist. That life is conceivable apart from God or other superhuman forces--in other words, for

human life to become disenchanting—was initially possible not because science rendered them implausible, but because notions of personhood led to a truncation of possibilities lying beyond the human mind. That which was considered real had to be that which humans knew as self-contained agents, being impenetrable by external powers.

How did the “buffered self” develop? The notion of the individual as closed off from outside forces initially began as deference to a religious imperative, when people were encouraged to act as though they were buffered. It was the unintended byproduct of a long-term religious-cultural project to close the gap between the doctrinally-minded elite and the practice-oriented masses, who frequently relied on the power of charged or holy objects in their worship activities, to the elites’ distaste. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, a “multi-speed” system of religion was common, meaning there were vastly different expectations for behavior between the masses and those who devoted themselves to the religious life—the clergy, virtuosos, or religious elites, including monks, priests, nuns, hermits, etc. In the centuries prior to the Reformation, there began to be increased esteem among elites for internal, devotional piety, and increased stigma against magic-based religious practices. Disenchantment of the modern Western world thus began as “serious attempts were made to narrow the gap between the fastest and the slowest,” referencing the distribution of lay and clergy across the multi-speed system (62). Magic seemed irreverent and idolatrous, overtly focused on worldly concerns and neglectful of matters of feeling and intent. Taylor explains, “A deep theological objection arose to the ‘white magic’ of the church, whatever its purpose. Treating anything as a charged object... even if its purpose is to make me more holy... is in principle wrong. God’s power can’t be contained like this, controlled as it were, through its confinement in things, and thus ‘aimed’ by us in one direction or another” (72).

This new religious ethic carried the moral imperative to pursue self-reliance, sensitive attention to inner experience, and rigorous spiritual discipline. Disenchantment was not the explicit goal, but an unintended byproduct of this ethic, the result of this “new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life.” Modern science is disenchanted not merely and not at first as a substantive conclusion of scientific research, but as an ethic guiding the ascetic separation of the individual mind from the outside world. In this way, “scientific reason was at once an engine and a beneficiary of disenchantment, and its progress led people to brand all sorts of traditional beliefs and practices as superstition” (Taylor 2007: 271).

The full story as Taylor describes it is incessantly detailed, weaving together diverse and seemingly disparate philosophical, political, and religious developments. His intention is not to show their inherent belonging to a shared project, but their happenstance collision that has produced the cross-pressured world of contradictory religious possibilities today.

Another important development, for instance, was the critique of the Enlightenment by the subsequent Romantic era, which viewed culture, tradition, authority, and doctrine as impediments to spiritual insight and experience. The Enlightenment came with many drawbacks for spiritual life, as it often was accompanied by a vision of human beings as egoistic, coldly rational, sometimes hedonistic creatures. In reaction to the Enlightenment, the Romantic Era envisioned the good life as a return to a pre-domesticated, natural, expressive life of feeling. Both draw from a sense of a buffered self—that is, the individual being the locus of intellectual and spiritual experience; but the Romantic notion brought anti-institutional sentiments and redefined the sacred as the experience of passion rather than the possession of knowledge. This would ultimately, for very many people, set spirituality in tension with church, community, and tradition, such that these things have often been rejected by moderns. But in his typical style,

Taylor explains that this structural shift regarding the place of religion in human life was first preceded by shifts in how human beings understand religion. Initially these movements, “wished to remain within orthodoxy,” but before long, the emphasis shifted “towards the strength and the genuineness of the feelings, rather than the nature of their object.... There comes to be a widespread feeling that the very point of religion is being lost in the cool distance of even impeccable intellectual orthodoxy. One can only connect with God through passion” (488).

Friederich Schleiermacher’s 1799 book *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* is a quintessential example of romantic thought embedded in modern religion. He criticized the “cultured despisers” of religion who assumed the religious enterprise to be based on inerrant, superstitious knowledge of reality, explaining that the explicit knowledge and belief claims of religion have always been flawed cultural constructions--imperfectly and yet vitally preserving the sense of oneness or wholeness with the universe (2016). For Schleiermacher, religion was construed as a vessel for the prized good of personal spiritual experience. Hence, passion becomes “well worth some lack of accuracy in theological formulation.... The crucial thing to explore is the powerful feeling of dependence on something greater. To give this reign and voice in oneself is more crucial than getting the right formula” (Taylor 2007: 488-489). Though Schleiermacher intended to rescue religion from Enlightenment critique, he contributed to the philosophical, theological, and moral impetus for spurning religion in the name of spirituality.

This romantic motive has been resurrected in a new form in the “age of authenticity”, Taylor’s term for the latest shift in notions of personhood and spiritual ethics emerging since the sexual revolution and counterculture movement of the 1960-70’s. By “authenticity” is meant the understanding that “each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model

imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority” (2007: 475). Like Schleiermacher’s religion, authenticity ethics often look condescendingly upon organization, institutions, language, and culture, as well-intentioned (at best) and corruptive (at worst) attempts at preserving and reinforcing spiritual experience that is more felt rather than known. Though the buffered self initially came to define human personhood out of obedience to a religious ideal, ironically, through its various evolutions, it eventually came to justify the rejection of religion.

The frustrated status of religion today is further compounded by its prominence in political and social debates in which it assumes the authoritative voice of history, warning and scolding against the rapid dis-embedding of sex, family, and religion. One of Taylor’s hypotheses for the United States being overall less secular than Europe is that the United States lacks the historical memory of widespread church authority, Christendom, as it existed in Europe for centuries. Yet in the wake of the ‘60’s cultural revolution and the rise of the Christian Right in the 20th century, American churches have assumed a loud political voice decrying the loss of traditional sexual and family norms, perhaps becoming a specter of the Church in premodern Europe. Though the sense is perhaps not so strong as it exists in Europe, the United States seems since to have more commonly linked religion with social control and traditional, rather than charismatic, authority. Taylor summarizes, “Whatever the level of belief and practice, on an uneven but many-sloped playing field, the debate between different forms of belief and unbelief goes on. In this debate, modes of belief are disadvantaged by the memory of their previously dominant forms, which in many ways run athwart the ethos of the times, and which many people are still reacting against” (533).

For those operating within an Orthodox paradigm of secularization, the Age of Authenticity and its undercutting of religious authority is often construed as an inevitable reaction to religion's plausibility crisis in modernity. Supposedly, the theory goes, in an age where urbanization, globalization, and the proliferation of communication technologies allow quick, easy and widespread access interactions with those of diverse and contradictory religious backgrounds, human persons can only rely on themselves to know what is true. Shared religious knowledge is no longer tenable. To some degree, Taylor agrees with this picture; he concurs with Peter Berger's argument in *The Sacred Canopy* that religious pluralism is related to the "fragilized" conditions of belief for Western people in 2000, compared to in 1500. He writes, "we live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on" (11). Matters of belief are always negotiated on this ground.

But following his typical pattern of argument, Taylor explains that this view of religious pluralism is unhistorical, and that it signifies and reinforces much deeper and more significant shifts in the understanding of personhood in relation to one's world. In the modern religious landscape, pluralism is encoded in the background social imaginary as a religious imperative. The Age of Authenticity entails an explosion of forms and expressions of religious and spiritual feeling, as individuals seek out their own "authentic," self-made connection with the world. Under this ethic, religious organizations, traditions, rituals, and language do indeed become suspect. But this is not merely because religion is grounded in beliefs that seem intellectually untenable; more fundamentally, it denotes communities and social spaces where uniformity of belief, conformity in practice, and unfeeling routine are encouraged. Meanwhile, authenticity culture thinks there should always be room for passionate, autonomous, personal exploration.

Religion binds to history individuals who should be free to live in the present, as they will.

Taylor writes, “this understanding of the place and nature of spirituality has pluralism built into it, not just pluralism within a certain doctrinal framework, but unlimited” (2007: 489). Our secular age is thus given shape not alone by the fragilization of religious belief, but the imperative that one ought to be personally paving one’s own spiritual path. Religious institutions are rendered problematic in both of these issues, for linked but disparate reasons, and hence the diminishing status and presence of religion in social spaces.

To conclude this summary, I will reiterate two points. First, Taylor’s analysis decidedly refutes the notion that the secular turn in modernity amounted to a stripping away of religion as a straightforward, natural, or in any way inevitable byproduct of the age’s social developments. These Orthodox secularization theories are what Taylor calls “subtraction stories,” that is, “stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge” (22). With an eye sensitive to cultural, theological, and philosophical developments over the past 500 years, Taylor demonstrates that “the secular” implied in secularization is an unintended, circuitous and winding accomplishment of religion—not the simple result of its subtraction. This means that when asking sociological questions of secularity—who are its carriers, where it is carried, how it is carried out—the specifics of its social and historical context must be engaged. Taylor adamantly insists he is telling the story of a particular region and people in history—the North Atlantic West, from the years 1500 to 2000. The secular age he describes ought not to be treated as detachable or generalizable beyond these parameters, even though this has historically been common in sociological studies of secularization.



Second, Taylor's analysis describes secularity in substantive rather than negative terms, and reinforces the need to do this in sociological work on religion. Apart from being unhistorical, subtraction accounts of secularization fail to offer rich description of where we are now, of what it is like to live in a secular age, which seriously limits their usefulness. As James K. A. Smith explains, "The 'secular' is not just the neutral, rational, areligious world that is left over once we throw off superstition, ritual, and belief in the gods" (26). There is substance to secularity; it implies and evokes particular values, ethics, and understandings of personhood that themselves necessitate explication as much as those of any religion. Unless these are directly studied and reflected on, the status of religion and secularization in modernity will remain impenetrable and the sociology of religion a stunted discipline.

The next section attempts to show how Taylor's work on secularity and authenticity culture relates to recent empirical trends in US religious life. I focus primarily on literature regarding religious affiliation, largely paradoxical and inexplicable within the theoretical parameters of Orthodox secularization theory, but more understandable given the transformation of modern Western views of personhood discussed in *A Secular Age* and other of Taylor's publications.

#### *A Taylolean Reading of Trends in Religious Affiliation*

America's religiously unaffiliated population has seen a major growth spurt in the past two decades, and peaked at 22.5% of the population in 2014 ("America's Changing", 2015). This is a notoriously puzzling group. At first glance, it seems they may be used as a crude measure for secularization (in the Orthodox sense), but sociologists warn against this for a couple of reasons. First, the unaffiliated include but are not exclusively non-believers; they are often believers of various sorts, who engage meaningfully with spirituality and religion in ways that typical

sociological measures (especially affiliation) do not detect. Second, there are no distinct, identifiable differences in belief and practice among the unaffiliated that are not broadly shared by many of the affiliated, such that it becomes difficult to identify what about them is distinctly nonreligious, apart from affiliation. Clearly, the unaffiliated population is not disconnected from religion in any consistent manner, and yet surely they demonstrate a trend to establish personal distance from religion. Taylor's theoretical framework offers promising insight into this paradox in treating secularity as a messy, unintended, historically-particular construal of reality (rather than simply the absence of religion). This explains why people might engage with both religion and secularity in complex, even contradictory ways. But more specifically, Taylor's analysis of the buffered self, the romanticization of religious feeling, and the rise of authenticity culture allows us to consider that the growth spurt among America's unaffiliated demographic is related to mass undertaking of a certain conception of religious and spiritual personhood. The rise of the Nones may indicate that religious affiliation is increasingly treated as an expressive facet of self-made spiritual identity, which often includes defining oneself beyond the bounds of traditional religious orthodoxy and authority.

Much research on the Nones corroborates with this theoretical possibility. Though checking the "None" box is obviously a natural choice for those who don't believe, slightly less than half of the unaffiliated actually name lack of belief as the reason they chose not to assume a religious identity (Lipka 2016). And a good portion of these specified that by "lack of belief", they mean "Not interested/don't need religion" or "Views Evolved" rather than "Disenchantment/don't believe." The other half of the nonreligious state reasons for leaving religion as dislike of organized religion, being religiously unsure/undecided, or being inactive, unpracticing believers. These findings do not necessarily mean that there has not been a rise in

unbelief, because apparently there is movement in this direction; but they do forbid hasty association of the rise of the Nones with a rise in unbelief.

Other studies suggest that the purpose of religious affiliation in individual lives has shifted; it is unhistorical to assume that affiliation has always corresponded with individual belief. There have been many nonbelieving and less practicing individuals in previous generations, but variation in belief has not always necessitated variation in affiliative identity. For instance, a recent Pew study found that Christians with low levels of religious commitment among the Millennial generation are more likely to identify as nonreligious than Christians with low levels of religious commitment from generations prior (Smith & Cooperman 2016). Some conclude from this that identifying as “None” has become more socially acceptable (par. 2). But it seems also related to transformations in the meaning of affiliation. For much of Western history, religious identity has been thought as a firm, fixed demographic characteristic; now many view it as a fluid, shifting, contextual facet of personal identity--almost like a mood. One longitudinal study found that about 30% of religious Nones identified with a religion one year after their first interview, and that many respondents moved in the opposite direction, as well (Lim, MacGregor, & Putnam 2010). The researchers distinguished between “stable nones” who identified as such across time on a variety of surveys, from “liminal nones”, who failed to do so. Liminal nones switched affiliative identities without drastic changes in belief or practice, leading to the conclusion that “their inconsistent reports on religious preference in panel surveys appear to reflect a liminal status of religious identity rather than volatility in their religious beliefs or behaviors” (614).

Another indication that modern notions of personhood lie behind the rising rates of disaffiliation is the close connections in the beliefs and spiritual values of the affiliated and

unaffiliated. *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of American Nones* (2016), Elizabeth Drescher identified a group of religious “somes” who purport a religious identity, and yet who “parallel and intersect” the lives of religious Nones in profound ways. In particular, both seemed to view personal spiritual identity as transcending traditional cultural or religious boundaries. She writes,

A None may periodically attend a chanted Taize service offered by a local Presbyterian church... without feeling the need to become a member. By the same token, a ‘cradle Episcopalian’ may from time to time attend a mindfulness meditation group at a Buddhist center without feeling obligated to give up or hyphenate what she thinks of as her ‘Anglican identity.’ If it is the case that some trace of institutional religious identity lingers within many Nones, so, too, a free-floating cultural ‘Noneness’ infuses the spirituality of many of the affiliated. The terms unaffiliated/affiliated, ‘Nones/Somes,’ are best understood, then, not as fixed categories in themselves, but as markers on a wide continuum of American religiosity and spirituality. (2016: 10-11)

It seems that on one hand, both the Somes and the Nones use religious affiliation as a form of self-expression. On the other hand, there is clearly a widespread sense that affiliation is an inefficient and potentially misleading form of self-expression. In the situations Drescher describes, individuals think of their spiritual identities as transcending the historical, liturgical, and theological boundaries of traditional religious affiliations.

This sense of the self transcending boundaries is traceable to the historical development of the buffered self Taylor details in *A Secular Age*. From this new social imaginary emerged the possibility to conceive of the good life—even a life in touch with the sacred—outside the bounds of sacraments, community, authority, and other features of traditional religious life. This is

exemplified in modern form by those Ammerman calls Golden-Rule Christians, those who follow the Protestant imperative of *solo scriptura* in believing they can “draw from Scripture their own inspiration and motivation and guidance for life in this world” without participation in religious community (Hall, 1997: 201). Golden-Rule Christians also tend to emphasize the ethics of relationality—good feeling and openness towards diverse people—as the core of Christianity, rather than specific doctrine. The declining numbers among the mainline, liberal Protestants has been repeatedly traced to these understandings of self, spirituality, and religion, which prioritize individual ethics in ordinary life and render church life largely superfluous, even if potentially helpful, to this aim.

These understandings of spiritual identity are not confined to those with Protestant ancestry, however. The embeddedness of Protestant social imaginary in American politics, the economy, literature, and pop culture is such that the Protestant social imaginary has infiltrated other religious traditions as well and produced similar results. Christian Smith, the director of the National Study for Youth and Religion, has routinely noted unexpected similarities across religious traditions, as well as across the affiliated and unaffiliated boundary, in what individuals believe about the good life, human relationships, and religion. From NSYR interviews conducted with American teens came Smith’s term “Moral Therapeutic Deism,” which refers to the implicit dominant religion shared by nearly all teens—especially by Mainline Protestant and Catholic teens, but also by many black and conservative Protestant, Jewish, and nonreligious teens. Smith shows that “what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people” (2005: 164).

Many of today's religiously unaffiliated are those who more or less identify as "golden-rule" adherents to their respective religious traditions, and further identify as "none" in order to express their inclusion of those with other religious backgrounds (though ironically, their self-understanding may indicate that they belong to the same Moralistic Therapeutic Deism form of religion). Under this view, holding ties to a particular religious heritage may seem superfluous to spiritual and religious identity and potentially an unwelcome barrier from other people. Nones claim that "care ethics" guide their interactions with others, placing relationality above legality, valuing cosmopolitan embrace of all people more than conformity to a fixed code of correct behavior (Drescher 2016). Despite not formally identifying as Christian, Nones are often compelled by the person of Jesus: but according to Drescher, "the appeal of Jesus to Nones has nothing to do with the institution developed by his followers, but rather his willingness to walk across religious and other social boundaries, through the lives of ordinary people, attending to their suffering, healing their afflictions, welcoming them into conversation, and sharing stories of hope" (189).

Thus, many of the nonreligious identify as religious simply because they find religion's goals better accomplished outside "organized religion", which can be distracting from religious aims, and even corrode them (Hout & Fischer 2002). Relatedly, many formerly-affiliated Christians value their religious heritage but find the politics of the Christian Right that emerged in the past century distasteful, unwilling to abide its stance towards abortion, gay marriage, and gender equality. Identifying as None allows them to express their political beliefs. As Ammerman (2013), explains, the rise of the "spiritual but not religious" often expresses a moral and political stance rather than disagreement with core religious precepts. Nones are averse to association with groups drawing moral boundaries between themselves and other groups.

The resulting picture of research on the Nones indicates that generally-speaking, they cannot accurately be described as “nonreligious” or “unbelieving”; these descriptors would only very imprecisely describe this group. Instead, it is more accurate to recognize that this group reconfigures and deploys religion in ways that are unrecognizable to previous sociology of religion. They are not a group exhibiting a negative contrast, a “no” to religion, but one expressing distinct understandings of themselves in relation to other people throughout history, geography, culture, and time. In particular, they view religious affiliation as a fluid facet of personal spiritual identity, one which is supposed to feel authentic—that is, consistent with their individual choices, beliefs, and inclinations. While some shed it due to unbelief, many aim only to shed old forms of religion they do not wish to associate with or that seem socially divisive.

Drescher explains that the category “None” is akin to queering of religion. That is to say, identifying as None consists of a deliberate, meaningful claim about the burden of traditional, linguistic boundaries to the good life that Nones envision for themselves and others. “Routinely transgressing such boundaries, believing and non-believing Nones insist that affiliation and unaffiliation, religion and the secular, belief and unbelief need not be in competition, but instead constitute a wide variety of resources that can be deployed in the service of human thriving” (2016: 248.) And to reiterate another of Drescher’s points, the rise of the Nones is a symptom of broader trends in American religion, and are not simply an aberration from the mainstream. Many who affiliate with a specific religious tradition often hold similar understandings of self, authenticity, religion, and community as the unaffiliated.

Taylor’s work is immensely helpful for making sense of these findings, by providing rich description of the social context from which they arose, rife with the unresolved tensions and paradoxes of history regarding the buffered self and religious community. His constructivist

approach allows us to frame these modern religious trends in the shifts and transformations of the social imaginaries of Western individuals, the distinct range of interpretive possibilities that guide daily actions. This approach rejects the objective, linear causality of subtraction accounts of modernity, which suppose matters of belief and interpretation to straight-forwardly follow certain structural changes or advancements. The history detailed in *A Secular Age* accounts for significant transformations to the modern religious landscape in the West while not making necessary correlations between modernization and secularity, structure and lived experience, or the European experience and the rest of the world, as many previous secularization theories have done. Overall, Taylor exemplifies fruitful possibilities for future research on the sociology of religion, through his attention to history and substantive analysis of secularity. The discipline might be far better equipped to describe and explain religious phenomena, would they take up these new theoretical parameters.

Yet Taylor's work has significant oversights, especially on some topics which matter very much to sociologists—like race and ethnicity. In short, Taylor thinks he sufficiently addresses the relevant social context of secularity by carefully specifying geographic and historical bounds to which his story applies, and refusing to generalize beyond them. Yet, he fails to clarify and acknowledge that *A Secular Age* is not merely the story of the North Atlantic world—it is that of the white North Atlantic world, and its developments have been significantly directed by comparative reference to cultures and peoples beyond its bounds. The next chapter will address the role of racial politics in the development of secularity, and its relevance to African-American religiosity.



## CHAPTER 2: RETHINKING RACE AND SECULARITY

### *Talal Asad and the Political Project of Secularity*

Anthropologist Talal Asad is not shy in his praise of Taylor's scholarship, but insists that Taylor neglects crucial points in his analysis—specifically, the political side of secularity. As was established at the beginning of the previous chapter, secularization theories typically go hand in hand with theories of modernity, and thus the political dynamics of the latter inform those of the former. For the most part, Taylor sidesteps this topic with a pluralist take, acknowledging that modernity does not hold an integrated, cohesive character across the globe and claiming to describe only one of multiple modernities—specifically, the North Atlantic world. While delivering on this aim, he evades the question of how diverse societies establish themselves in relation to each other, bracketing the contemporary West's relation to non-Western places in order to zoom in on what is happening within. This strategy is insufficient according to Asad, as it fails to account for the political project of modernity, which has been lived as real, even if is not considered intellectual justifiable. The modernist project, deeply entwined with the linear reading of secularization, assumes modernity ought to have a singular, cohesive character while overtly recognizing that this is not yet the case. Asad explains, “assumptions about the integrated character of ‘modernity’ are themselves part of practical and political reality. They direct the way in which people committed to act in critical situations. These people aim at ‘modernity,’ and expect others (especially in the ‘non-West’) to do so, too” (2003: 13).

Asad thus emphatically insists that no story of secularity is complete without addressing relevant political context. Not content with examining the internal philosophical and theological substance of secularity, his work seeks greater understanding of who secular culture is born from as well as the cultural “others” who serve as reference points for its implicit values and

construals of the good life. Secularity imposes certain terms by which “modern living is required to take place, and non-modern people are invited to assess their adequacy. For representations of ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’ in modern and modernizing states mediate people’s identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences” (14).

It is perhaps easy to see how Orthodox secularization theories were grounded on deeply-disparaging portrayals of the intelligence and advancement of other societies. Yet even more generous forms of secularity fall under this critique, for instance those that see secularity as an embrace of religious pluralism. Embedded in this view is the assumption that ideally, human persons of diverse worldviews and religious beliefs can find a common denominator to their experience—a Rawlsian “overlapping consensus”—that allows them to live peaceably in society (Asad 2003: 2). Taylor himself endorses this kind of secularity as a solution to the problem of pluralism, arguing that while authenticity culture has its flaws, it impels a form of spiritual personhood that encourages sincerity, individual choice, and a base level respect for individuals to interpret their experience of the world as they will and live accordingly. This has long been thought a viable path forward for a pluralistic world prone to contention and conflict over religious differences. Asad is convinced, however, that these notions of personhood continue to honor certain people while implicitly, if not deliberately, debasing others. The West’s authenticity-minded secular culture celebrates “freedom from all coercive control, a history in which everything can be made, and pleasure always innocently enjoyed” (2003: 73). (Though obviously he uses different language, this description ought to recall Taylor’s language of the buffered self.) Purportedly, anyone whose beliefs and values are self-made and sincere, developed in conditions free from constraint, should have their beliefs and values respected. Yet

surely not everyone lives nor seeks to live this kind of life (if any do at all). Are the beliefs of non-Western persons (as framed here) the kind that can be honored in a secular society?

According to Asad, the answer is no; Western spaces have previously defined and continue to define Islam as unjustly imposed upon individuals by the force of tradition, being especially oppressive to women. Because they do not understand or articulate themselves as the type of human persons that secularity endorses, as buffered selves, they are politically marginalized. Asad rather pessimistically concludes that even the most generous, pluralist form of secularity inevitably excludes those who may think of their faith in impermissible terms, for instance as obedience and deference rather than individual choice. In its talk of human rights and human dignity secular culture has cultivated, if unconsciously, a means of silencing, defanging, and asserting dominance over Muslims, whose form of religion flies in the face of its most cherished values. Grasping these inter-cultural politics, subtly encoded into secular culture, is crucial to understanding secularity as it plays out in contemporary life.

For the rest of this chapter, my interest is to think through Asad's critique of Taylor in regards to race and secularity in the United States. While Asad focuses on relations between Islamic societies and the European West, I consider what his theoretical insights might mean for African-Americans, who are not national outsiders yet have been labeled and treated as racial outsiders in American politics and remain so in key ways even when the dominant political narrative no longer admits as much. This point is justified by constructivist understandings of race, which show that racial differences perpetuate in the subjective and phenomenological realms of human life, not being contained merely to law, science, or other formal institutions. Throughout the 20th century, sociological understandings of race have somewhat paralleled the trajectory of understandings of secularization; objectivist theories of race fell out of favor and

constructivist theories took their place. Race is no longer viewed as an inherent, natural, or biological feature of human beings but as a socially-constructed and politically-motivated ideology that governs the way people experience themselves among other human beings in the world. Racial differences do not begin and end with skin color any more than secularity begins or ends with religious affiliation; in order to understand race, scholars now delve into the lived experiences of those marked by racial ideologies (which includes whites as well as minority groups). Race is increasingly defined “not in terms of objective commonalities but in terms of participants’ beliefs, perceptions, understandings, and identifications” (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004).

Given Asad’s point regarding the national and ethnic politics inherent in the development of Western secular thinking, and this constructivist understanding of race, we are impelled to ask, what are the racial assumptions encoded into mainstream American secularity? What features of lived experience for African-Americans impede many from developing a secular identity? Before taking up the question in this form, I will first review previous explanations, supplied by Orthodox theories of secularization.

#### *Orthodox Explanations for African-American Religiosity*

Sociologists have long observed the unique propensity for religious faith among African-Americans, and yet studies regarding trends in religious faith, practice, and affiliation (for instance, those reviewed in the previous chapter) rarely specify the racial scope of their claims. This reluctance reflects the lingering influence of outdated paradigms of secularization theory, in which secularization is implicitly treated as a growing and inexorable feature of the contemporary religious landscape, even a normative feature, such that its social context—in this case, racial context—can be treated as appendages to sociological description rather than critical

contingencies. According to Asad, this oversight is not merely an intellectual misstep—it is a vital dimension to modern racial and religious politics.

When the topic of African-American religiosity has been explicitly addressed, it is often dismissed as a causal result of African American's structural location in society. The topic is broached by two means: A) indirectly, as explanations for the high propensity for spirituality and religion among African-Americans, and B) directly, as explanations for why African-Americans are distinctly disinclined towards secularization. The former relies on functional definitions that presume blacks need religion as a means of coping and galvanizing community support, given their disadvantaged conditions. The latter treats the secular as a universal, axiomatic feature of modern life, sometimes even as a moral “good” of modern life that blacks have historically been barred from because of their subordinate racial, educational, and socioeconomic status. Both are fundamentally objectivist explanations, reducing African-American religiosity to a matter of structure, rather than engaging their interpretive lived experience on its own terms.

These points can be readily seen in the three most common explanations for why blacks tend to be more religious than other racial or ethnic groups in the United States:

1. *African-Americans continue to rely on religion as an emotional, social, and economic resource to mitigate the suffering caused by their subordinate social position.*

Black religion's explicit claim to suffering as a racialized people makes it easily corralled into loosely-Marxist understandings of religion. These define religion as means of coping while restrained under oppressive conditions. In a study of American religious congregations, Ammerman explains that religious congregations act as “the places where otherwise voiceless people have a voice, where those denied leadership learn to lead.” This, she says, is “emphatically true for African Americans... When no one else seemed to hear the voices of pain,

black churches were communities of solidarity and comfort. When no other spaces were available, church sanctuaries became organizing halls” (1997: 363). Evidence that black religious life functions as a sanctuary is often taken as sufficient explanation for its existence.

The coping theory of black religion is often oddly coupled with an explicit liberation theology and historical efforts at fighting racial discrimination. Religion has been an indispensable component of organized efforts to promote racial justice in the United States. Martin Luther King Jr.’s effectiveness as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement was both enabled and intensified by his double role as a pastor, which gave him the ability “to combine a mode of sociopolitical dissent... with folk religion of the people and the revival technique to which they enthusiastically responded” (McGuire, 2002: 274). The imperative to transform societies that is found in much (though not all) of African-American religion does not fit well with the Marxist construal of religion as an opiate for the oppressed masses. But these two functions of religion are frequently, and perhaps unsystematically, integrated together as sufficient reason for why many African-Americans would have incentive to remain religious.

1. *African-Americans are excluded from a secular sphere where they might educate themselves and develop identity beyond the constraints of religion.*

Blacks have historically been excluded from—and frequently victimized by—secular communities and institutions wherein whites are welcome to explore and establish their sense of reality and self-identity without resorting to religion. Biological theories of race that prevailed among the scientific community in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries indelibly gave blacks a late and haunted start in the game of scientific learning, compounding initial disparities in educational opportunities with the presumption that blacks were intellectually less capable. This notion provided impetus for targeting black bodies as objects for research, like in the notoriously

unethical Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Many will argue that the troubled history of science and race impedes blacks' exposure to knowledge which would undermine the religious truth claims they hold to. Additionally, the widespread presumption that science functions as an egalitarian project producing objective and ahistorical knowledge blinds many atheist, humanist, and secular communities to their own culpability in perpetuating the racial inequities.

According to Black atheist activist Sikuvu Hutchinson, the problem is more than a forgetting of the history of racial discrimination in scientific institutions; more fundamentally, it is a lack of consideration for the multi-faceted poverty that pervades black communities and that drives them to the emotional rescue and social services religion characteristically provides. As she candidly puts it in *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars*: “For communities of color, the lifeblood of organized religion is economic injustice” (2011). This oversight prevents even self-proclaimed humanists from accomplishing the material and structural transformations necessary to liberate blacks and others from religion. Hutchinson routinely berates New Atheist writers Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens for their overly-intellectual, white and Euro-centric critiques of religion, dismissing as “backwards” those who may turn to religion not out of irresponsible irrationality, or willed ignorance to scientific knowledge, but out of sheer embodied neediness. Drawing “a clear line of demarcation between the religious and non-believer,” she finds their work ultimately to treat ethnic identity, which inevitably carries economic disadvantages, “as a barrier to rationality.” The implicit exclusion of African-American experience in these communities is such that many African-Americans are essentially uninvited to participate in broader atheist movements.

2. *Blacks face discrimination within their own communities if they decide not to practice or believe in religion.*

On the “Black Atheist” blog, writers frequently bemoan the discomfort of being a “minority within a minority”, meaning that not only do they suffer racial discrimination within broader American society, they suffer religious discrimination within the African-American community (“There’s no Such Thing” 2017). Atheist literature commonly addresses the difficulty of “coming out” to friends and family as a non-believer, and black atheists often feel they have it even harder, given that they belong to an ethnic community more vigorously religious than any in the United States (Thomas 2017). The social consequences for coming out as atheist would be even harsher, in this environment.

Many describe this as rooted in the need for religious solidarity among African-Americans in the face of shared opposition. Because the Black Church has historically been the center of African-American life, including the site of organization, planning, and support in efforts to fight against racial hegemony, abandoning the faith is often treated as the equivalent of abandoning the cause. The atheist philosopher of religion William R. Jones once wrote regarding “my plan for black liberation and my uncommon religious conversion from black Christian fundamentalism to black religious humanism” (1998: vii). Like many black atheists, Jones argued that taking suffering as a necessary experience to salvation impels a person to endure it, and that the simultaneous claims of ethnic suffering and the goodness of God within black Christianity perpetuate a theological framework of divinely-effected racism. Although his black humanism ostensibly emerged directly from the themes and imperatives of black liberation theology, he later wrote that his ideas received no less than a “xenophobic” response from black theologians, who determined that it was “not a faithful trustee of liberation theology’s philosophy and practice, nor of the black religious tradition. In fact, they found it to be a fraudulent traitor to these traditions” (xi).



The theoretical assumptions latent in these three explanations lag far behind those in general studies of secularity. Essentially, they each reduce African-American religiosity to their placement within a deeply-entrenched, oppressive structure. They rely on subtraction accounts for secularization—treating secularization as an axiomatic feature of modernity, such that blacks' marginalization in dominant modern culture instantly and adequately explains their tenacious religiosity. According to Taylor, however, structure is never sufficient as explanation without acknowledging the antecedents in the social imaginaries of human persons that allow structure to make its particular marks. In other words, all of these structural diagnoses may be true as descriptions—that black religion has served as means of solidarity and support in resisting racial discrimination, that blacks have been excluded from aspects of secular culture, and that blacks tend to react strongly against other blacks leaving the faith—but there is more to the story, which can only be grasped by examining the interpretive worlds of African-Americans on their own terms. To assume otherwise turns a blind eye to history, which shows that white secularity has emerged from a thoroughly distinct social context that blacks cannot be expected to have shared in. This does not mean, first and fundamentally, that blacks have been deprived of universal human goods. More simply, it means they have not historically participated in a white construal of human goods that is entirely particular. This exclusion is historical before it is structural, in the objectivist sense. Thus, the three explanations named above are not inaccurate as observations, but they are insufficient as explanations.

Asad's argument carries a grave critique of these theories, as well. More than being unhistorical or intellectually untenable, they carry out the modernist political project that unconsciously, if not deliberately, degrades those who do not meet its implicit stipulations regarding agency and buffered personhood. By taking the structural position of African-

Americans as sufficient explanation for their continued religiosity, African-Americans are depicted as passive and inert, as voiceless victims who have not yet achieved full humanity. While this view is typically deployed in attempts of alerting others to their yet-unrealized human rights, it is also—inevitably—immediately dehumanizing and reproduces the dominance of white society by reinforcing its implicit conceptions of agency and personhood. It sidesteps the need to take African-Americans seriously as interpretive beings, whose understandings of self, faith, and community hold viable weight among other understandings in modernity. To take them seriously, and to acknowledge that there can be other legitimate means of defining personhood, might dangerously relativize the white construal of the world and destabilize its justifications for power. Asad's work suggests that this oversight is rooted in the politics of modernity and needs to be considered in secularization research.

The next section lays out an alternative route for understanding African-American religion. It uses the analytical techniques of both Taylor and Asad that question how lived experience informs religious action, and how lived experience is shaped by political relations, in this case those that allow one race to govern another. Obviously, much greater historical, sociological, and theological depth is needed to do adequately explore all that this explanatory route might entail. This is merely as a preliminary attempt and a single possibility of framing African-American religion within the theoretical parameters established by the Revisionist paradigm in secularization theory.

#### *Possible Revisionist Readings of African-American Religiosity*

There is much to suggest that the lived experience of African-Americans heavily impedes cultivation of the particular notions of agency, personhood, and religious experience endorsed by secularity. To begin unpacking this, I will briefly compare the opening question of W.E.B.

Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, one of the first and most acclaimed texts in African-American sociology. Dubois' question stands in significant contrast to Taylor's opening question in *A Secular Age*. As we know, Taylor's question asks "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" (2007: 25). Meanwhile, Dubois asks, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (2017: 7). Strikingly, both questions point to a troubling pluralism at the heart of the modernity, a multiplicity of human experiences that comes to be defining of religious life. For the North Atlantic world, the pluralism problem is a vast variety of options for belief, all of them simultaneously haunting and weakening the claims of others. For African-Americans, the problem is being a problem—that is, the target of derision and discrimination in a system of racial hegemony. If the challenge for the North Atlantic world is its being uprooted from history, restless and unsure, disinclined to trust the ground provided by its own religious heritage, then the challenge for African-Americans is their deep bondage of history, being reminded wherever they go of the sheer, inescapable constraints of racialized embodiment

From the time of its origins, African-American religion has explicitly incorporated its unique historical situation into theology and practice. This is true of black Judaism, black Islam, and black Catholicism as much as it is of black Protestantism; all these have had a meaningful and enduring presence in African-American communities. But I will focus the subsequent analysis on black Protestantism, as it describes the majority religion for African-Americans and has yielded greater sociological attention. Christianity initially spread among African-Americans while enslaved by a white populous seeking to perpetuate their state of docility with religious justifications, and often, additionally, to "[exterminate] every vestige of indigenous African religion" that they misunderstood and despised (Johnson 2017: par. 22). Despite these fraught

conditions for conversion, Baptist and Methodist Christianity continued to adopt myriads of black converts after the Civil War, who subverted these initial conditions of conversion and found in their religion a sanctuary and means of resistance against a hostile society.

Although common religion enabled some degree of unity across racial boundaries, there was strong cultural impetus keep white and black churches segregated following emancipation. Independent black churches sprung up in the latter half of the 19th century and took on unique theological tenors to address the situation; black preachers and congregants found hopeful spiritual resonance in the Exodus story from the Bible, which told of a people unjustly enslaved and guided by God to freedom. Though ostensibly freed from slavery, the ongoing struggles of segregation, lynching, and discrimination of various forms kept the memory and continued experience of bondage alive for African-Americans. The Exodus narrative gave them language for critique of their conditions, resources for spiritual and political response, and bound them together as a community. Eddie S. Glaude writes, “By appropriating Exodus, they articulated their own sense of peoplehood and secured for themselves a common history and destiny as they elevated their experiences to biblical drama” (2000: 9). Thus, while drawing from the same scripture and religious tradition, black protestants formed a cosmos crucially distinct from that of their white counterparts. White Protestantism (and often parallel to it, white secularity) has always been strongly informed by the historical memory of what it has intentionally left behind—the traditional authority of Catholic Christendom, with its stifling constraints, sacraments, and commandments. Meanwhile, black Protestantism has been propelled by a sense of where it ought to be going, looking ever towards its pending destiny and hope for liberation.

This divergence is far weightier than a mere intellectual quibble regarding the nature of the cosmos. Fundamentally, these invite different ways of imagining oneself among other human

beings in the world and within the cosmos, which would matter immensely for the capacity for African-Americans to blend into American secular spaces. Notions of authenticity, for instance, whether spiritual or otherwise, pivot on one's sense of historicity. For whites, pursuing authenticity entails shedding unwanted constraints of one's given historical conditions, including family, religion, tradition, and even embodiment. African-Americans are hard-pressed to imagine themselves as free, disembodied, self-determined agents of this kind, when written into daily experience are the constraints of history, imposed by a racialized society that cannot simply be shrugged off because it doesn't align with their personal desires. And indeed, the expectation that they ought to be able to do so reinforces the social imaginary that has justified the racialization of their bodies. Such an expectation upholds the particular construal of the world developed out of white North Atlantic society. African-Americans are truly in a bind, if to meet conditions of selfhood in a secular age they must acquire a de-historicized, chosen and free authentic "self," while lived experience reminds them of their historicity at every turn. As the black theologian James Cone wrote, "It is not possible to enslave a people because they are black and expect them not to be aware of their blackness as the means of liberation" (1970: 49).

Though controversial, the black consciousness movement demonstrates monumental differences in the experience of personhood between white and black persons. Put simply, it spoke directly to the inescapability of African-American's given historical conditions on their sense of self. The black consciousness movement emerged in the 1960's-70's urging African-Americans to claim and celebrate their belonging to the black race, and this as means of liberation. Cone explains that "the new black mood" involves becoming fully aware of "blackness in the context of whiteness" (1970: 49). Rather than attempting to assimilate into white culture, or turn a blind eye to its violence, the movement encouraged the honest

recognition of blackness in every way, ranging from language to beauty standards to educational and occupational expectations and certainly to matters of faith. The movement has not been explicitly religious in all its forms, but it certainly did make waves in the Black Church. For instance, the separation of white and black Christianity came to be framed by some in terms of the relationship each holds to historical identity. Many believed that while the white church may have ceased to believe that “history is the arena of divine revelation,” the black church would not forget (52). A louder, yet humbler turn towards their racial identity would unify and brighten the black presence in America, a visceral reminder of the nation’s crimes of violence committed in both the distant and local history. These would need to be reckoned with before anyone could be redeemed. Cone elaborates on what this means for the African-American sense of personhood:

Black consciousness is the black man's self-awareness. To know blackness is to know self, and to know self is to be cognizant of other selves in relation to self. It is knowing the criterion of acceptance and rejection in human encounters. To be conscious of his color means that the black person knows that his blackness is the reason for his oppression, for there is no way to account for the white racist brutality against the black community except by focusing on the color of the victim. (1970: 50)

In striking contrast with the radically-buffered self, whose beliefs, actions, and encounters with others are supposed to be individually chosen under already-free and liberated conditions, the black self finds authenticity in seeing oneself as singular in a world of many others, governed by rules of others’ making—being distinctly unliberated, or not-yet-liberated. To see oneself in this way, to embrace blackness, was not merely about self-acceptance but about the moral imperative to wake up broader society to its place in history.

As a model for political action, the black consciousness movement has yielded mixed reactions, and yet many less aligned with Cone's theology appreciate and endorse his articulation of African-American lived experience. Black writers frequently describe self-awareness for blacks as acknowledging oneself as radically rooted to history and to the body, and distinctly aware of being a threat—a “problem”—to that of broader society. Dubois says it is like possessing a “double consciousness, [the] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, to unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (2017: 2).

These divergent notions of personhood establish differing conditions for religious belief, such that “religious pluralism”—supposedly one of the key features of secularity—appears not to pose the same threat for African-Americans as it might for whites. Taylor emphatically argues that the sheer structural fact of religious pluralism is not enough to cause secularization to occur; secularization is contingent upon a particular social imaginary at work in a society. The notion that belief can be “fragilized” by religious pluralism seems premised on certain interpretive conditions that may adequately portray lived experience for whites, but less so for blacks. First is an understanding of belief as linguistic, representative content residing in human minds, which is contingent on the modern development of the buffered self and subsequent disenchantment of the universe. In other words, that religious pluralism becomes an existential problem for Western moderns is only the case because it has become possible to separate the content of one's mind from the external world, and thus possible for the content of one's mind to “inaccurately” represent the external world. Second, this notion assumes that one's originary experience in the

world is to take one's own beliefs, values, practices, and culture for granted, never questioning their truth or universality. Berger's entire thesis in *A Sacred Canopy* depends upon a picture of the premodern world as a seamless, uninterrupted flow between individual experience and the social structure, such that they are literally unconscious of any division (1967). Religious pluralism threatens faith that begins from this condition because it disrupts, critiques, and uncomfortably exposes beliefs which before could be naively taken as true. Taylor modifies the theoretical parameters of Berger's argument, but essentially affirms that plausibility structures have broken down in the modern West such that belief is severely, sometimes fatally fragilized.

For African-Americans, belief does not consist merely of linguistic content residing in the mind because it is fundamentally tied to a historical project aimed at the liberation of their bodies. Their claim to suffering as a people and yearning activism means that belief hinges on far more than plausibility, and there is far more at stake than private, internal cognitive dissonance. Already, this shows that belief is established on terms that make them less vulnerable in the face of religious pluralism. Additionally, for African-Americans, the originary conditions of existence are vastly different from those Berger describes. The beginnings of self-awareness involve recognition that one's experience in the world is not normative—in fact, they disrupt the normative. One exists in consistent disjuncture with the social structure, including its rules and reality-definitions. There is no naïve state of being to be jolted out of.

Thus, the phenomenon of the faith crisis explicated in *The Sacred Canopy* and somewhat differently in *A Secular Age* is contingent on an understanding of oneself that seems unlikely to adequately describe lived experience for African-Americans. And yet classic explanations for African-Americans' propensity for belief, emerging from Orthodox takes on secularization, chalk it up to their isolation from educational and economic opportunities that might expose



them to such faith crises. This view rather brashly overlooks the more violent, embodied, and immediate type of pluralism that black writers describe as inherent to African-American lived experience—that of racial hegemony, being perpetually a racialized other that disrupts other people's worlds.

This chapter has aimed at establishing the importance of seriously grappling with the lived experience of African-Americans on their own terms. Further work is needed to supply rich description of the conditions of belief for African-Americans in the contemporary world—what it is like to believe—through the kind of deep historical analysis that Taylor provides for others in *A Secular Age*. We need not assume there are essential, objective differences between blacks and otherly-racialized persons to do this. The constructivist view of race understands that lived experience in a society imbued with racial ideologies leads to the development of certain subjectivities, functioning within a distinct range of interpretive possibilities. Clarifying these possibilities, including the understandings, aims, and stakes of religious life for African-Americans, is important both for the sake of understanding, and to reveal the racial politics quietly embedded in secular notions of personhood.

## CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS

### *Description of Data*

The empirical piece of this project attempts ethnographic description of white and African-American young adults' construction of religious and spiritual identity. The process of describing and explaining personal beliefs, values, and practices exposes the implicit understandings of human personhood, community, and religion, which Revisionist scholars such as Taylor and Asad have argued are pivotal in understanding the substantive scope of secularity. This study draws from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a longitudinal survey of American youth well-suited for ethnographic research, as it provide access to young adults opinions, attitudes, and personally-narrated experiences related to a variety of ubiquitous yet sensitive life arenas, such as religion. Conducted across four waves from the years 2001 to 2012, the survey's explicit aims were to:

Research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral, and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent and perceived effectiveness of the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives, in order to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion. ("Research Purpose", 2017: par. 1)

NSYR deploys a mixed-methods longitudinal design, capturing: a) broad-scale trends via telephone survey administered to a large, nationally-representative sample of both youth and their parents, b) in-depth, textured understanding of youth's self-interpretations through open-ended interviews with a subset of the telephone survey sample and c) change over time by

repeating both the telephone survey and in-depth interviews with the same sample in four waves. Wave 1 was conducted in the years 2002-2003, Wave 2 in 2005, Wave 3 in 2007-2008, and Wave 4 in 2012. (To account for unresponsive respondents during the follow-up waves, 61 additional respondents were interviewed to replace them.) This makes NSYR especially useful for making a host of comparative possibilities, including the perspectives of youth and their parents as expressed on telephone surveys, between youth and other youth from a variety of religious, cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, between responses garnered by the telephone survey and those garnered by the in-depth interviews, as well as between the same individual youth across different stages of their lives, as they were interviewed multiple times.

This project compares black and white young adults from Wave 4, when respondents are between the ages of 23 and 28. Because the research question is open-ended, inquiring *how* young adults establish religious/spiritual identity, in my results section I used only the in-depth interviews and not the responses from the telephone survey. The interviews provide a close-up, intimate look at the dynamics between understandings of self, religion, family, and community life in young adults' personal narratives, while the survey would have offered brief, truncated, and standardized answers. As is typical with qualitative research, the results are intended to be exploratory rather than strictly explanatory, articulating possibilities of racial difference rather than statistical or otherwise generalizable conclusions.

The use of Wave 4 was also strategic, based on my prior experience with the preceding waves. Waves 2 and 3 only interviewed a subset of the interviewees, and thus would have offered smaller sample sizes. Wave 1 had the largest sample size of all four waves, but the respondents were between the ages of 12 and 18 at the time of the interview. As teenagers, most still lived under their parents' roofs, few having traveled abroad, taken college courses, entered

the job market, or tried their hand at long-term relationships. The religious struggles they encountered seemed not to extend far beyond that illustrated in their homes, schools, and worship spaces. Though many were more religious at this point than they came to be in subsequent waves, interestingly, they provided sparse detail and spoke dispassionately about religion. Mainly, teens shared concerns about boredom in church and spiritual laziness. While this would be an ideal set of interviews for other research questions, Wave 1 simply doesn't exhibit the wrestling with historicity and establishing identity that this study intended to examine, at least not to the extent that Wave 4 does.

Wave 4 was especially suited for this study due to an irony manifest across the interviews: even though most respondents had moved away from home and lived far more independently of their parents' influence than when they were teens, when asked about religion many spoke extensively of their religious upbringings—as if making sense of it were critical to understanding their adult religious identities. Their interviews thus provided a rich site to assess how they locate themselves as individuals in relation to history—both their local, familial, personal histories, as well as to a broader human history. It turns out that there were divergent patterns in how black and white young adults connect their adult religious identities to their religious upbringings, exhibiting deeper differences in their assumptions regarding personhood, family, and history. This point will be clarified in the analysis, but suffice it to say that Wave 4 proved to be the most helpful of all the NSYR waves for this study.

The sample (n=251) was selected through a simple procedure. Wave 4 respondents who had participated in the in-depth interviews were sorted by race, the independent variable of interest. Of the 302 total respondents, 213 identified as white in the survey, 38 identified as black, and 51 as some other race, including Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. Although

these latter minority groups, too, bear unique racial and ethnic trajectories in regards to religion and personal identity, including them in this analysis would be too complex and lengthy a task. Since my main interest is to make a case for significant differences between whites and blacks' experience, the 51 respondents with non-black and non-white racial identities were disregarded, leaving 251 remaining respondents. Unfortunately, the sample size for blacks (38) is a fraction of the sample size for whites, so the latter is bound to represent a greater variety of persons than the former. This is a weakness in the study that could not be rectified, since literally every respondent identifying as black was included in the sample.

Young adults in the sample subset represented a variety of religious traditions, including Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and Jewish traditions, as well as the unaffiliated. The interview participants had initially been selected to be nationally representative of the proportions of the United States population that people of these religious traditions hold, with an oversampling of Jewish households to account for this minority tradition. While the religious tradition in which one was raised would certainly confound one's adult understandings of religious identity, prior research has shown that White Protestant understandings of spiritual personhood have bled significantly into all modern Judeo-Christian traditions, and also that Black Protestantism tends to put forth different understandings. For the variable of interest in this study— how young adults understand their spiritual/religious identity in relation to their religious upbringings--it was expected there would be greater differences across race than across religious categories. This reasoning informed the decision to include persons from all religious traditions.

The decision to include those both with and without a religious affiliation was also based on insights from prior research, which finds that the boundary between affiliation and

unaffiliation is fluid across time, and that changes from one to the other often do not correspond to substantial transformations of belief and practice (see Chapter 2). What's more, sorting by religious affiliation would have been quite tricky, as there were frequent contradictions in self-reports offered in various parts of the survey process. In the telephone survey, when asked to respond affirmatively to a set of options, many respondents offered something different than when asked their religious affiliation to the interviewer. And when the interviewer probed what they meant by their stated affiliation, often they equivocated, adding unique sets of qualifying terms and adjectives to describe their own personal religious identity, or at least to describe the difficulty of stating it with a simple label. Consistent with the research on affiliation, many of the NSYR respondents apparently do not experience religious identity as a discrete or fixed demographic marker, but a figment of personal identity that fluctuates across time and social context in meaningful ways. Thus, I decided to include all black and white respondents in my sample, regardless of their current or former religious affiliation.

Still, I made note of the differential proportions of white and African-American respondents without a religious affiliation. The proportions corroborated with the trends noted throughout the literature review which find a greater propensity for identifying as nonreligious among whites; 103/213 whites had no religious affiliation and only 9/38 blacks had no religious affiliation, percentages of 48% and 27%, respectively.

### *Description of Methods*

After selecting the sample, I uploaded the interview transcripts into MAXQDA, a software program aiding qualitative data analysis. I then conducted an exploratory coding phase to determine the most productive method for locating sections of the interviews relevant to respondents' religious upbringing. The NSYR interviews covered a wide variety of topics, each

with over a thousand lines of text. After experimenting, I found that using the search term “religio” facilitated quick and simple tracking of all mentions of the words religion, religious, and religiously. Obviously discussion of religious identity could have occurred without using any of these words, but having spent time reading the full length of multiple interviews during the exploratory coding phase, I was assured the “religio” search term offered efficient, systematic, and surprisingly-thorough way of locating key passages, with little left behind.

Through MAXQDA, I sorted pertinent passages into code files organizing multiple pieces of the research question. At the same time, I continuously updated an excel sheet with notes and jottings ranging from a few sentences to full paragraphs in length. A set of quantitative measures on the excel sheet attempted general summary of respondents’ religious upbringing and orientation, for quick reference during the writing process. To further ensure I had caught as many significant passages as possible, when coding I read the entire sections where “religio” was used, not just surrounding sentences. This offset the chances of overlooking important details and also allowed me to gain a quick grasp of each young adult’s personal context and current religious orientation, including level of interest, participation, and articulateness in religious and spiritual matters, and major life events. I made note of these things in the jottings and quantitative measures, and all of this guided the interpretation process.

Conveniently, most of the interviewers had followed the questionnaire with rough exactness, so the key word search turned to similar parts of the interviews, allowing more direct comparison across young adults. Not all respondents gave equal weight and time developing their responses to each set of questions, but most interviews had between 2 and 16 passages worth coding, where the questionnaire had elicited personal reflections on their religious matters. These questions and their follow-up questions provided the bulk of the coded content:

- a. How similar are you to your parents in terms of religious beliefs and practices?
- b. Do you do religious things with your parents?
- c. Do you talk about religious beliefs or issues with your parents?
- e. How do you normally decide what is good or bad or right and wrong in life?
- f. Do you think any religious beliefs play a role in deciding what is right and wrong for your life?
- g. What do you think you'll teach your children about morality, moral responsibilities, and what's right and wrong?
- h. How would you describe yourself to me in terms of your religion or spirituality?
- i. Have your feelings about church or religion changed in the past five years?
- j. Tell me about the things you believe religiously.
- k. What have been the most important influences on your views about religion, faith, beliefs, or spirituality in the last five years?
- l. How do you know what's true or not when it comes to religion? How do you evaluate various religious claims?

As I explained above, it became clear during examination of Wave 4 that respondents' reflections on the religious upbringing facilitated by their parents, grandparents, siblings, and relatives functioned as a key place to work out the struggles and tensions of adult religious identity. Because of this, it seemed best to analyze these interviews as personal narratives, rather than scientific, journalistic accounts of their religious upbringings. I focused not just on historical events and circumstances of respondents' lives, but how they built a sense of personal identity in the telling of them. Thus, the coding, notes, jotting, and writing processes explored the narrative elements of the interviews, including how they characterized themselves and their parents, which



events and experiences were given greater weight and significance than others, and how they situated their current selves in relation to the past.

While noting the different narrative elements used by white and black young adults, I also considered whether the personal narrative format worked better as means of establishing spiritual identity for one race over another. The personal narrative has gained prominence in modernity as a literary technique, means of interpersonal communication, and a methodological tool for the social sciences, even though it expresses and reinforces Western modern notions of self, that is, of a “disengaged, particular self, whose identity is constituted in memory” (Taylor 1989: 288). Underlying the interest in personal narrative is the assumption that self-identity is the kind of thing to be established individually through perpetual interpretive work, and is not something fixed or passively bestowed. In Chapter 5, I will explain that African-American young adults in this sample are prone to think of religious identity in the latter, rather than the former way. Their accounts of their religious upbringings were thus significantly less crafted, cohesive, or rhetorically strategic, compared to those of white young adults.

The analysis was guided by the inductive approach of Grounded Theory, which attempts to construct concepts, categories, and theories through internal evaluation of given data rather than assessing data in terms of a preconceived theoretical framework (Hesse-Biber, Nagy, & Leavy, 2004). The following analysis should thus be understood as an attempt to locate these interviews relative to each other, rather than mapping them onto pre-existing classifications. As is typical with inductive approaches, the concept-construction occurred through a gradual, laborious, cyclical process of questioning and refining ideas. Initially I located, read, coded, and took notes on key passages without attempt to make immediate sense of them. But insights and questions naturally arose after combing through several transcripts about the distinct ways that

interview respondents relayed the events of their religious upbringings and told the story of them coming to inhabit their current position on religion. Making note of them, these were tested out and altered as I read more of the interviews. By the time I had read through and coded all the transcripts, I had a rough scheme to organize the various trends and patterns, which was further refined in the writing process. Continually revisiting the interviews while writing allowed them to serve as a source of regulation, critique, and triangulation for the concepts being expressed, and many ideas were added, dropped, modified, and nuanced along the way.

The next two chapters discuss the results of the analysis, which are organized as follows: first for white young adults, I offer a) a general summary of the struggles and concerns expressed among them regarding their upbringings and religious/spiritual identities, and b) present three common narrative personas they adopt to make sense of these struggles. Next, for black young adults, I offer a) the same type of general summary, and b) the two common narrative personas observed within their interviews. Throughout, I interweave insights from the previous chapters on secularization theory.

## CHAPTER 4: WHITE YOUNG ADULTS

### *Overview*

The white young adults in this sample seem to envision themselves as far more than inhabitants of their individual homes, jobs, worship spaces, and local communities. Even as they describe the most intimate facets of their religious identities, they situate themselves as part of an economy, nation, religious and scientific communities, and a human history hundreds, if not billions, of years old (when considering human evolution). When it comes to religion, they speak as though they are navigating the vast universe of human culture rather than their local and familial circumstances alone. The particulars of their own religious heritage shrink into relative insignificance compared to all the ascertainable ways of thinking, believing, and acting. In rough concordance with Taylor's prognosis, religion for white American young adults seems fragilized amid an endless plurality of possibilities for living.

The motive that guides these young adults is the pursuit of individual authenticity—choosing among the options available those that best match their internal values, feelings, and inclinations. Yet it is not so simple as choosing. Regardless of the scope of time, geography, and culture they can bring to mind, respondents are uncomfortably aware of being bound to a precise location in history, their lives irreversibly set in motion by their particular parents, siblings, ancestors, hometowns, schools, and life events. Pursuing authenticity is not merely a matter of choosing among multiple options, but of detaching and distinguishing oneself from parents, relatives, and religious communities so that one can choose independently of these constraints. Nearly all these respondents, even those whose religious views largely align with their parents' on the surface, organize the details of their religious lives to rhetorically demonstrate that their identity has been self-made, resilient against social constraints, and chosen under free conditions.

There seems to be immense shame implied in the alternative, which is for one's religious practices, beliefs, and affiliation to simply be the passive products of their upbringings.

Remarkably, this fear was manifest among white young adults across religious affiliation and from diverse family backgrounds, though they responded to it with different rhetorical moves. I have arranged my analysis of their interviews by describing three narrative personas they exhibited, each representing a distinct rhetorical strategy for establishing one's religious or spiritual identity as autonomous from upbringing. The three narrative personas include: 1) the religiously disaffected, who portray a gradual process of enlightenment, estrangement, and liberation from their parents' faith, 2) the religiously conflicted, who maintain meaningful ties with their family religion but insist in various ways that they are internally unbound by it, and 3) the religiously devout, who enjoy harmony of belief with family but vigorously assert that their faith has been autonomously-acquired. Many respondents fit firmly into one persona, but sometimes they float back and forth between them, and hence these should be thought of as ideal types rather than discrete empirical categories.

The following analysis will zoom in the lens on young adults navigating religion in family contexts. Yet I intend to show how there is far more going on here than differing types of family dramas. Manifest in them are individuals struggling to become and present themselves as independent agents in history. Family, and particularly parents, are typically those held most responsible for establishing the historical conditions of their children's lives. Thus, responses to family demonstrate ways of responding to historical conditions, including constraints, which are fundamentally unchosen. Religion is a facet of identity that white young adults seem to unilaterally agree ought to be established by personal choice, free from coercion, and thus the quest for authenticity predictably involves conscious negotiation of family circumstances.

*The Religiously Disaffected*

When assuming the “religiously disaffected” persona, respondents describe rejection of their religious upbringings as a mark of independence, freedom, and maturity. They relay the events of their lives as a courageous process of de-conversion, a hard-won wrestle against any false, unethical, coercive, or misinformed components of religion that they have been exposed or subjected to by their family, friends, acquaintances, and broader culture. Their narratives tend to elevate themselves above religious persons on moral, spiritual, or intellectual grounds, sometimes subtly but other times quite brashly. While obviously those respondents with no religious affiliation fall into this category, others maintain nominal ties with religion, participate minimally in it, and claim to retain core spiritual truths from their upbringings that continue to resonate with them. Others have had no religious upbringing at all, but still take on the disaffected persona. This latter scenario may seem counterintuitive, yet perhaps it demonstrates the pervasiveness and the allure of liberation narratives as means of establishing personal identity, in white Modernity. Given how these narratives resemble the subtraction stories of Orthodox secularization theory, which operate as accounts of the identity of the modern West, perhaps this should be no surprise.

Yet not all who organize their accounts through the liberation narrative end up exiting religion. A wrinkle in this picture is that the few cases of converts in the sample also draw from it, though they use it to explain why they have latched on tightly to a new religion in adulthood. They similarly describe themselves as having acquired a freer, truer, or more ethical spiritual/religious identity in adulthood compared to an inferior one imposed upon them as youth. Later in my analysis, I will weave together their accounts with the other disaffected young adults. Taken altogether, the religiously disaffected youth (including converts) establish their

sense of authenticity by explaining how they have managed to acquire freedom from previous religious constraints which is manifest in their adult religious identity.

As they start telling their stories, religiously disaffected young adults often tell of emerging dissatisfaction and distrust with their parents and religious communities, later morphing into full-on estrangement. Very often, they explain that this distance was initiated by doubt, or exposure to ideas that challenged their religious beliefs. A former Catholic explains, “After high school I just have [had] certain events just happen and just kinda made me question, and like, also, friends started to question religion and then you know, you get into science and so I definitely decided to take a stance away from religion.” A former Christian remarks, “When I was a little, little kid, obviously, you know, mom told me to pray. I prayed, but you know... Soon as I realized I couldn’t pray for a Nintendo, I started looking it up, figuring out why not, and come to find out...” (He trailed off into silence.) Other times, the distance came as young adults felt they discovered a truer identity beyond the behavioral expectations of religion. A former Mormon states, “I feel like I was one person and I was kind of forced to do all this stuff which I had to play along with obviously. Um, but going through that and then Americorps and everything, I was like ‘Oh this is who I really am.’ Over here, not what I’m told who I’m supposed to be.” A former Jew agrees; she recalls growing skeptical of the stories and history of Jews taught her as a child, and describes her current self as follows: “I feel happier that I’m not like almost like a servant to those beliefs.”

Strikingly, many who have had virtually no religious upbringing *still* tell a story about the acquisition of their nonreligious worldview as a process of personal maturation and deliberate, not incidental, rejection of religion. A young adult whose parents raised her culturally Jewish, without expectation that she take Judaism seriously as a religion, nevertheless claims, “I

definitely questioned organized religion. Again, it's the fact that people blindly believe this stuff and don't stop to question anything." Another young adult, raised nonreligious, decided to move away from the South where he grew up because, "it was in the Bible belt and you ran into so much ignorance down there." The following young adult distinguishes himself from his nonreligious family members who are more sympathetic to religion than he is:

I'm a, like, very strong atheist... I basically don't like any kind of mysticism, and with my dad it's more, he and my stepmom are both pretty areligious, but they're still more agnostic... Like, "Oh everything is good, and everything is..." You know, [they] see the value in religions, you know. Whereas I, I'm not a fan of religious institutions at all.

Once again, these examples demonstrate the preeminence of subtraction stories in modern Western culture. And to Asad's point, we will see that they manifest as far more than journalistic accounts of history, but also as a means of organizing and making sense of one's self in relation to other people, whether distant communities or one's own family members.

Disaffected young adults typically claim their current understandings of religion have evolved via sensitivity to their personal intellectual, spiritual, and moral inclinations over a period of time, yet the effects of their newly-formed beliefs seldom remain personal. They often recast the lives of their parents, relatives, friends, and religious communities to be in alignment with their evolved notions of religion. For example, disaffected young adults frequently explain the reasons behind others' beliefs as a need for comfort or explanation for suffering, discounting the possibility of their beliefs being valid as epistemic claims. One nonreligious young adult says that he doesn't think his mother truly believes: "I actually don't think anybody really believes in God on the merits of the...argument." Nevertheless, his mom hangs onto religion because, "she's afraid of not existing, because it's the only state you can't know. Um, and she's afraid of losing

her family.” He concludes that, “If it’s the method of construction she needs in order to deal with that, I’m fine with that, but I just don’t need that construction.” Another young adult who declares he does not like “organized religion” and that “the whole concept of Jesus and God, it’s very conflicting in my mind” says that, “my mom has started to go back [to church]...My grandfather passed away two years ago, and when that happened she kinda went that direction.”

Their understandings of others’ religious motivations carry immediate relational effects. In their reflections, disaffected young adults frequently invoke an intellectual and moral hierarchy in which religious persons come out on the bottom, characterized either explicitly or implicitly as improperly educated, inflexible, or scared to face up to difficult realities. A former Christian explains that he finds his parents’ church “weird and archaic” and that whenever they drag him there, he can’t help but get “bored and upset.” He explains, “Like whenever they’re you know, doing a, you know, like their scripture readings or a sermons or whatever, I’m like, ‘That’s incorrect. Oh look, he just contradicted himself. That doesn’t make sense.’ Science explained it this way, you know, just stuff like that.” Another, quite frustrated at his church’s stance on gay marriage, recalls to the interviewer his vexation regarding his particular Church’s involvement in supporting a bill that would restrict gay rights. Asked, “How did that change your opinion on the church?” he replied, “Intelligence was put behind, I don’t know, they didn’t think it through. You try to have an intelligent conversation, I tried with my mother and it ended up her screaming at me.” Another describes disagreements with his “super religious” mother thus: “I think there’s a way that you can approach things, and she thinks that there’s one set way. I don’t believe that. I don’t mean--like I keep an open mind.” And a former Christian states matter-of-factly, “Religion doesn’t really make sense to me. I mean Christianity in general is, I don’t, it doesn’t make sense. I view the world very critically, rationally, so... I’ve never found it



convincing. It conflicts with what I see in the world around me and what I think is, it conflicts a lot with science which I put a lot of stock in, so.”

While many of the disaffected are quite disparaging of religion, others direct their derision towards their upbringings in general, and use religion as means of marking themselves distinct from it. In this way, there is an unexpected similarity between those who reject religion and the few converts in the sample. A woman who married a devout Christian and has since begun believing in God notes, “Marrying into a family that has more Christian beliefs than the family I grew up with [to] kinda guide me has definitely helped. Seeing that after the troublesome childhood that I had that, such wonderful people can come into it definitely helped me realize that everything has a purpose. Everything has a reason.” A man who joined the Jehovah’s Witnesses views his conversion as a merciful life transformation after being abandoned by his parents and resorting to crime and drug use as means of coping. “I was doing bad,” he says. But through God, he was able to grow and “turn my life around. And that was just a godsend, I mean I thank, I thank God for helping me get my life together. ‘Cause without him, I wouldn’t be here today.” These conversion stories obviously do not entail the shucking off of religion manifest in subtraction stories and the liberation narratives of other disaffected young adults; and yet similarly, they use their transformed religious perspective as means of criticism of their upbringings and establishing identity. In both, there is personal maturation and deliberate rejection of one’s historical constraints, enabling a new self to emerge. One’s sense of spiritual identity pivots on a negative comparison of where they have come from. Their narratives stress a constrained, oppressed, or otherwise troubled upbringing and a gradual process of personal learning, exploration, estrangement, and emancipation from these oppressive constraints. The

result is an adult identity that celebrates its relative freedom, maturity, enlightenment, or sophistication while bemoaning the religion of their youth, or religion in general.

Religiously Disaffected young adults powerfully exemplify the spirit of authenticity culture that Taylor describes as deeply characteristic of Western modernity's secular age. This historically-distinct understanding of personhood is evident even among those who see their faith pivoting purely on rational, logical, or fact-based grounds. Though many of the disaffected youth claim they rejected religion because they found it intellectually implausible, their doubt unsurpassable, clearly there is more: the assumption that they ought to heed, honor, nurture, and express this doubt through personal identity. Previous studies of religious affiliation have shown that while doubt has long existed among religious persons, it has not always been the case that doubt is thought properly expressed by religious affiliation (see chapter 1). These young adults seem firmly to take for granted that one's inner, cognitive disposition towards faith—which in this case, includes doubt—ought to be the primary grounds for establishing religious identity, (and not deference to community or to relational obligations as it may be and have been for other societies). Their personal intellectual and spiritual meanderings which form the explicit content of their narratives seem inextricable from these implicit background assumptions regarding human personhood.

This lends support to Taylor's argument that the structural state of religious pluralism may indeed not sufficient to account for secularity; religious pluralism poses a threat to faith only as latent cultural understandings of personhood have situated it to do so—specifically, the notion that religious identity ought to be “authentic”, and thus that one's internal inclinations ought to guide. Because this imperative is taken for granted in their social context, the intellectual doubt incurred in pluralistic situations does indeed lead some away from religion.

*The Religiously Conflicted*

Those classified as “religiously conflicted” are white young adults who deliberately maintain bonds with the religious tradition of their families and ancestors while describing their most intimate spiritual identities as independent from and to some degree, impenetrable by tradition. As they relay the events of their religious upbringings, they portray meaningful tension between genuine connection with their religious heritage as well as a sense of its insufficiency to describe them entirely. Unwilling to align themselves with the comprehensive package of beliefs, political views, and practices of their faith tradition, they share much in common with the disaffected; but while the disaffected endure discord with family and community to sever themselves from the unwelcome impositions of religion, the conflicted speak appreciatively of religion as an incidental, fortuitous, or perhaps permanent spiritual resource and social adhesive in their lives.

Thus, the conflicted develop their sense of authenticity by describing themselves as deliberate interpretive agents who willfully inhabit the tension between their given historical conditions and their self-made identity, trading in the costs and retaining the benefits of their religious upbringing so as to relate to it on their own terms. In this way, they demonstrate that their religious identity has been autonomously cultivated, and is not the causal consequence of historical location. While the disaffected include respondents included those who have formerly identified with a variety of traditions, the religiously conflicted primarily come from Jewish, Catholic, and Mainline Protestant traditions. Some maintain nominal affiliation with these traditions, and some do not.

The conflicted frequently describe a private, inner spiritual identity layered inside their outer religious identity as expressed by practice or affiliation. These dual identities are not

antagonistic, but complexly entwined. A girl who considers herself “Catholic-lite” had left the Catholic Church for a season but returned, drawn back by its spiritual environment. “I like to be part of a community of other people.... I feel comfortable to pray and meditate and that’s really what I enjoy.” Nevertheless, finding herself unable to believe in everything the Catholic church teaches, she reframes the experience of being Catholic to emphasize the dimensions she resonates with the most: “To be catholic and be catholic lite is sort of just—just doing, just... living ethically. Living, um, ethically and, and trying to do what’s right.” A Jewish young adult explains that because he has tried out many different Jewish synagogues, he finds his religious identity to transcend the particular modes of practice in each of them. His diverse experiences have led him to see religious practice as an arbitrary form of expressing deeper spiritual truths. “I have done conservative, reconstructionist, and reform, and I don’t really consider myself one or the other. I’m comfortable with any of that... I guess I just, you know, I believe in it, or at least big parts of it.” The following young adult offers illuminating depiction of how he layers his internal sense of personal identity within outer conformity with tradition, which the religiously conflicted young adults manage:

I was raised in a Catholic family, and I identify with a lot of those beliefs. But I honestly break that typical Catholic mold in [the] sense that I don’t feel that I have to teach everybody and I don’t feel that I have to make it an outwardly known. And that I think that my spirituality and religion is something that’s important to me, but it’s really just my own personal belief, and it’s really just something that I use to cope with certain things in my own head and that’s what gets me through. And it’s not extremely often that I have to do that, but in instances it can be nice to use as something to answer questions, I

guess, or something like that, but for the most part I think spirituality is just kind of a personal state of mind.

To express this dual identity, conflicted young adults are prone to add extra adjectives as they describe their affiliative identities, of which “cultural Jew”, “ethnic Jew”, “agnostic Catholic,” or “Catholic lite” are common examples. With these modified religious labels, they simultaneously express loyalty to and independence from their tradition. Significantly, they demonstrate that their loyalty is chosen, self-aware, and not merely incidental. One young adult explains, “I was raised Catholic, uh, but now I’m just agnostically Catholic now, I don’t take everything for face-value of the church.” Sometimes they find labels do not suffice, however. Another Catholic describes her parents as “churchy religious” but finds her own spiritual identity incapable of being pinned down in words; “I’m like way more, like, I guess relaxed about it and in-tuned in different way... I don’t know, I feel like I have like, kinda like, my own little understanding and it’s probably a little different than theirs.” A Jewish young adult clarifies that while his parents are religiously Jewish, he is only culturally Jewish, stating, “religious people tend to let rules dictate their lives, and “I’m just not that kind of person.” Nevertheless, he is drawn to the rituals, symbols, and holidays of his Jewish heritage, “The sense of identity and ancestry and history is--is, um, is meaningful. Um, and you can’t ignore it and it’s just, you know, it’s just part of who you are.”

Maintaining the intricate balance of their inner spiritual identities with their outer religious identities leads to an equally tricky balance in their characterizations of religious family, friends, relatives, and ancestors. Often, they invoke a hierarchy similar to the disaffected in which their own particular values and viewpoints are cast as intellectually, morally, or spiritually superior to those of others. But they also are often admiring, appreciative, and

sometimes sentimental towards those who relate differently to religion than they do. A Catholic woman, age 26, has recently become more invested in her faith but still is not as religious as her mother; conversations about their differences have simply “led to a lot of arguments...So I really kinda stay away, or I might make a comment or something, but I just go, okay, I understand that’s how you feel. I know how you feel. And I just let it go.” An agnostic Catholic explains the lingering influence of his deceased grandfather on his continued religiosity, “I kind of have a level of agnosticism but at the same time... I know I can’t go wrong by going to church. [I’m] just kinda thinking, you know, he’s gone--he’s up there. I don’t wanna make him mad by not going to church – ‘cause knowing my grandpa, he wanted you to go to church, so.”

Additionally, the conflicted young adults are acutely aware of their indebtedness to their religious upbringings for many of the values, habits, and beliefs they esteem as adults, even when they feel somewhat removed from their upbringings, internally. A Jewish woman remarks, “I think a lot of like my actions and beliefs are rooted in the fact that I am Jewish. Um, so yes culturally Jewish, [but] I could start becoming more religious again just because I like looking back I did learn a lot of good things from Hebrew school.” A Christian remembers, “I think that’s really- that’s a pretty important experience for a child to have...I have a lot of really distinct memories about being little and a lot of them, um, are at church just ‘cause everything is so different and by design, you know, it’s meant to be very impactful. These accounts evidence a more nuanced and sympathetic understanding of one’s given historical conditions on adult self than the disaffected young adults displayed, and yet they speak of these conditions as if they are removed from them. They recall and reflect on the benefits of their upbringings in a distanced, rational, almost critical manner, and make clear that if they to continue in the path projected by

their upbringings, or choose to re-establish these conditions for their children, that it is because of this personal interpretive process rather than passive obligation.

Like disaffected young adults, conflicted young adults often experienced levels of estrangement with family, but rarely entirely or with hostility. They, too, often elevate themselves above others on intellectual, moral, and spiritual grounds, highlighting the ways they are misunderstood or misrepresented by their religion. But ultimately they offer much gentler depictions of those who relate to their religious tradition more straight-forwardly than they do. A Christian who's coming out as gay has prevented her from feeling entirely home in her parents' Christian faith nevertheless has maintained many of her beliefs, in no small part to her parents' openness and acceptance of her. Her father, for instance, welcomes her challenging questions in Sunday school even when it ruffles other people's feathers. And her mother responded this way when her daughter came out to her as gay:

I think my mom knew that it wasn't just a phase, like because she saw it when I was hitting puberty and when I was in high school she asked me point blank in high school. Are you questioning your sexuality? And I denied it. All of that so it was just like okay, ya know, you know how your father is, you know how we feel, you know what our beliefs are but she literally said you're still my daughter and I love you and nothing's ever going to change that no matter what you do. No matter who you date, no matter who you marry, none of that matters. So ya know, she and my dad were really accepting.

These interchanges with her parents represent the negotiation with religious heritage that many of the conflicted young adults engage in; accepting that barriers may be insurmountable to feeling wholly engaged in the religion of their upbringing, often they look on it fondly, even gratefully, and participate as they are inclined to do so.

Thus, while conflicted young adults seldom feel the entirety of their spiritual identity can be ensconced within the boundaries, beliefs, practices, and communities of their religious heritage, they do feel it is deeply entwined with them. Their narratives portray a meaningful tension between two facets of their identity: that which is historically-given and that which is self-made. Though they may say that their given religion is “just part of who I am,” it is clear that they do not reduce themselves to their given religion. Rather, they apparently imagine themselves as transcending these boundaries, able to see through, over, and under them, and thus to relate to them on their own terms. They present themselves as agents with the capacity to rethink, reshape, and rename their religious traditions, taking what they appreciate, rejecting what they do not, and making it their own. Their claim to authenticity is grounded in the fact that they undergo this individual interpretive process, that they don’t allow themselves to be mere passive recipients of the historical. Thus, like the religiously disaffected, underlying their explicit claims are certain assumptions regarding personhood—namely, that one ought to be forthright and intentional in navigating identity, refashioning it to conform to internal dispositions.

### *The Religiously Devout*

Respondents who take on the “religiously devout” persona as they detail their religious upbringings speak effusively about their own thoughts, feelings, and spiritual experiences while scarcely mentioning or downplaying the influence of their parents. While they occasionally invoke a moral or spiritual hierarchy--perhaps criticizing their parents or others for not living up to certain standards--more often than not, they portray themselves as spiritual equals with their parents, sharing similar joys, griefs, and challenges with them while walking side by side on the same path of devotion. Their accounts are peppered with assertions—sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit—that their faith is the product of their own seeking and studying. Even while



many of them have followed their parents' religious paths, they appear to be astutely aware of the possibility that their religiosity may simply be a product of family obligation or conformity, and incorporate arguments against this interpretation of events into their narratives. It may not be surprising, then, that the vast majority of these young adults are either Evangelical Protestant or Mormon, traditions which stress individual piety amidst a comprehensive, unyielding overlap of family and religious commitments. The faith of devotees to these traditions faces the perpetual risk of lapsing into routine or insincerity, especially if conformity will earn them social approval.

Devout young adults readily and eloquently recount moments of personal conversion, or retell moments when they decided for themselves that they would live the faith. "I prayed about it and I read about it for myself, y'know, I tried--I tried to find the answer," a Mormon young adult shares. Another explains, "My parents raised me a member of the LDS church, and I finally was like, 'K, I need to know for myself whether or not it's true.' And so, I prayed to Heavenly Father, and I just had this confirming feeling that yes, it was." An Evangelical Protestant explains that her parents never stopped her from questioning her faith, which allowed her to discover its truth on her own. "They never stopped me from looking at other material, I just asked me to talk about it with them if I did. And I've talked about it with other friends too. I've studied other religions at different points, some for academic interests, some for personal interests but there are some holes in other beliefs. Inconsistencies and issues." The following example comes from the interview with an Evangelical Protestant male, portraying the importance of his individual conversion experience for distinguishing his faith from family:

It wasn't really until I was at Clemson that I took ownership of that and kind of evaluated... For example, with Jesus, if he is who he says he is then...this is going to impact my life a lot more—then like, this is monumental ... So I would say it was during

my freshman year that I was kinda like, wrestling with that. And I just came out the other end like, like, I believed this and I accepted this completely for the first time, and that's when I became a believer, that's when I became a Christian... It's been kinda interesting because seeing parts of my development and I'm different in ways from my family.

Assertions of the autonomous-acquisition of faith arise in telling places, like when the interviewer suggests a connection between their personal practices and their parents' expectations—as if relaying conversion experiences serve to quell suspicion that their fervor is a product of family loyalty or obeisance. Sometimes, they explicitly name the concern that relying on others' faith is spiritually dangerous, because one needs his or her own foundation. A Mormon young adult explains, “I try not to be influenced by others' faith because when you put your faith on someone else's faith it can crumble; like I said, like it has to be individual. It has to be a choice.” Another, when asked the most important influences on her faith in the last five years, replies, “I would say what I'm studying. Like scripture study. My parents are there to support me. But it's really been just my own.”

In their characterizations of their parents, devout young adults sometimes elevate themselves above their parents, but the dynamics of the resulting hierarchy are more dependent on their parents' success in living up to their beliefs than what it is they believe. Secure in their own faith, these young adults speak with authority to evaluate their parents' actions from a distance. An Evangelical Protestant young adult says that she is “proud” of her parents, “for being good parents to me and my siblings, and still being married and having a good relationship.” Another admits he isn't sure if his parents have ever been very serious about their faith. “I don't know. Just sometimes it seems like the obligatory prayer before a meal is just almost rehearsed, it seems... As far as, like, hearing other--what seems like a very sincere

prayer, I can't say that I've heard many of them from either—Or, like, seen them spending time in the word or discussing like, um, theological issues.” A Mormon man says, “My dad I look at as a bad example,” because when it came to religion, his father was prone to always give “the rule without the reason why.” The following example from a Mormon female exemplifies how in their personal narratives, devout young adults are sometimes prone to frame the events of their upbringings as tests of their parents' spiritual fortitude:

They would be separated for like six months, maybe longer sometimes, with the intent to be divorced, but then one of them would say no wait we shouldn't get divorced we need to work this out, and things would be good for awhile and then something else would happen... I mean they, we were all the same religion and they knew that they had made promises not just to each other but to God, so that—that was the biggest factor. They said they couldn't just throw it away because not only did they, you know, they may not like each other at this point, but they, God is part of their relationship and they needed to talk through it and work through it and now currently they have probably the best relationship they've ever had and that's—that's comforting knowing that they didn't just give up.

When they could have several times and nobody would've even questioned them.

The next example is from an Evangelical Protestant male, similarly evaluating his parents as he describes his religious upbringing:

I learned from my- from my parents just by watching their example- the way they interacted and their marriage and the way they treated us, um, and even like my dad--he's a banker and just seeing just the way he treats his customers and looks out for their interests and does things that might not be quite by the book but to help out—maybe help out somebody who might need a little extra help-Um, just little things like that, um, are

all huge... And that would be somethin' my kids could see and um, that I would treat other people I just come in contact with every day with respect and then- and then treat my wife with respect obviously, their mother.

Whether or not they have had children, they are prone to imagine themselves in their parents' positions, taking spiritual responsibility for other persons. Their occasional judgment of their parents, as in the examples above, reflects a sense of spiritual equality as they share in the burdens, struggles, joys, and successes of religious living. One Evangelical Christian remarks, "I feel for parents... It's a really difficult rope to walk on, like, wanting [children] to stay in your faith but not wanting them to them to fall off or keeping them straight." A Mormon says that when imagining Heavenly Father's love for him, he is reminded of "the feelings that I have for my little girl. Sometimes I have this thought that I feel like, is the spirit telling me, like that is how Heavenly Father feels about you? So." An Evangelical Protestant demonstrates the continual interweaving of family and religious life. "I think ultimately failure would be to walk away from the Lord, and to not be faithful.... It would be a failure if I walked away from my family as well, or walked away from responsibilities, like, gave up working, or just laid around and was lazy." Similarly, this evangelical Protestant explains how her personal faith is tied to future parenthood.

I want my children to feel that same, I want them when they're young, to, to really know the truth. Because it's the same thing as learning anything about trust, what's a counterfeit dollar, not by studying counterfeits but by studying the actual dollar because then that difference will pop out at you like that's wrong...Lord willing, they'll come to a personal faith in Christ and if they don't than that's the Lord's will.

While these examples may appear to indicate only that devout young adults prioritization of parenthood and their desire to raise children, they seem also to reveal their relationship to their own historicity. Like disaffected and conflicted adults, devout young adults evidently do not see themselves as having been determined by their historical conditions. Instead, they invoke imagery of themselves as parents to demonstrate that they already transcended such a stage of passivity. They view themselves as responsible, capable agents in the world, positioned to shape and fashion the conditions of life for others, and in particular, their children or future children.

This tendency to see themselves as fully mature and self-determined adults is exemplified in the other common elements of their narratives, such as critical evaluation of parents' actions, downplaying parental influence on adult religious identities, and repeated recounting of personal conversions. They speak of religious faith as sturdy and respectable insofar as it is a product of personal searching and insofar as one consistently acts in accordance with faith. In this is evident devout young adults' deep interest in authenticity. While they clearly value family and strive hard to uphold their family obligations, there seems an inescapably individualistic component to the way they are carried out; specifically, they evaluate their hold themselves personally responsible for enacting sincere coordination between formal obligations with their one's inner convictions and dispositions. Believing their own minds to be responsible for determining truth, and their own bodies capable of following through, the religious life they depict involves the continual, intentional striving for congruity of their feelings, actions, desires, and expectations with their professed religious identity.

### *Summary*

Though the devout young adults are insistently non-secular, it seems they nevertheless share much in common with their more secular (conflicted and disaffected) counterparts. As

predicted, across affiliation and family circumstances for white young adults there appears a broadly-shared, implicit understandings of the self in relation to the given historical conditions of life. All three groups relentlessly assert that they are not merely products of their given historical conditions, that their current outlook on religion has been predominantly determined by their own choices, experiences, and investments. *A Secular Age* primed us to see these similarities, as the secular and religious alike share their cultural roots in the same (white) Western civilization.

In reminiscence of Christians centuries ago, urged to relinquish their reliance on magical powers to develop personal holiness, these 21<sup>st</sup> century white young adults share a sense that they are—or rather, ought to be—buffered selves. As buffered selves, white young adults seek to shield themselves from the impositions of that which is external to their own minds and bodies in order to nourish and cultivate a free and integrated sense of self. Their shared context of a disenchantment world is such that they do not fear the impositions of ghosts, spirits, or supernatural powers so much as their sheer historicity—the mass and messy impetus of human society, ranging from the distant evolutionary past to their local, individual families, which has crucially and irreversibly shaped the ground they walk upon, including their religious heritage and all the idiosyncratic habits, values, practices, and beliefs it has bestowed upon them. None of them deny that they were given circumstances to respond to not of their choosing—in this case, a particular religious upbringing. Yet all seem compelled to prove through narrative how they have personally distanced themselves from, evaluated, and chosen to engage with their upbringing on their own terms. They have shed their passivity to their historicity and become agents within it. To do otherwise, they seem to fear, would entail their identity's loss of credibility; insofar as the conditions of buffered selfhood must be met to achieve the standards of modern forms of “holiness”, to do otherwise would be to mark oneself as belonging to a lesser humanity.

## CHAPTER 5: AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUNG ADULTS

### *Overview*

African-American young adults in this sample tend to organize their self-portraits based on differing criteria than their white counterparts. Rather than personal autonomy, it seems it is primarily fidelity to family, religious community, and to God that undergirds their understandings of religious identity. (Virtually all of the black young adults in this sample are resolute believers in God, even those who are non-practicing.) Thus, markedly absent in accounts of their religious upbringings is the shame and sheepishness white young adults tend to exhibit about the influence of their family's faith on their adult religious identity; in fact, black young adults often boast of alignment with their family as reason for pride. If anything, they manifest shame when they feel they have disappointed others by not practicing regularly or by breaching religious expectations for behavior.

Previous examination of Orthodox secularization theory's understanding of African-American religiosity ought to serve as caution against the hasty conclusion that this difference is explained by African-Americans' being relatively naïve to challenges to faith compared to white young adults. It's true that as a whole, the black young adults in this sample have a lower educational attainment than the white sample, but it would be difficult to make a case from their interviews that their differences stem from this fact alone, if at all. Individually, they represent a variety of class backgrounds and educational experiences, and speak accordingly. Like their white counterparts, they know themselves to be engaged in a large, complex, and diverse human society of which their own upbringings and experiences represent only a small part. They, too, have attended college, sought full-time work, moved across the country or across the world from their parents, moved in with boyfriends and girlfriends, pursued marriage, born children, and

faced many of the hallmark difficulties and rewards of adult life. Their encounters with the world have made them aware of the variety of religions, cultures, and perspectives on life; they know about scientific challenges to the bible and culture wars over salient social issues—they are familiar with these topics when interviewers ask about them. And yet very often, black young adults seem confused as to the relevance of these questions when asked; this demonstrates a break with white assumptions regarding religious identity as well as the pervasiveness of the latter, which informed the writing of the interview questionnaire.

When their interviews are evaluated through a Revisionist perspective, it becomes stunningly apparent that the deepest differences are related to their implicit notions regarding human personhood, community, and historicity. African-American young adults in this sample speak of religious identity as more or less fixed based on the given historical conditions of their lives—including family, religious affiliation, and religious community. Even if they switch denominations, they see themselves as demonstrating fidelity to a core of faith given them in childhood. Most in this sample being Protestant, they no less than white Protestants believe in the importance of developing individual piety and belief, but the arc of acquiring it apparently doesn't necessitate striking out on one's own spiritual journey, independent of parents', grandparents', and community's influence, but of committing more fully and intentionally to inherited faith.

This shows in how they narrate their religious identities. Ironically, it seems that because they view religious identity as relatively stable, black young adults exhibit a telling lack of concern with describing a tidy, coherent picture of diverse experiences they've had with religion throughout their lives. In most cases, they reflect on their religious upbringings matter-of-factly, with much less of the intentional, elaborate narrative crafting that white young adults employed



in their interviews. As we will see, sometimes their experiences lie jarringly un-integrated; they are much more accepting of disjuncture between their religious beliefs and their individual inclinations and actions, or between differing attitudes towards religion at one stage of life compared to another. All these things can fluctuate without serious implications for how they understand their religious and spiritual selves. From a white perspective, this raises the question of how they justify their continued loyalty to religion—their continued loyalty may appear inauthentic, insincere, unexamined, and embarrassingly deferential and passive. But these African-American young adults frequently cite the sheer fact of their historical belonging to a religion as sufficient justification. To them, sincerity seems measured by fidelity to the historical conditions of their lives, more than it means the intentional coordination of internal dispositions with outer affiliation. The result is that the sometimes messy, uncoordinated, tumultuous accounts of their religious upbringings stand juxtaposed with the more deliberate, careful, and crafted personal narratives of white young adults.

Here, then, is one of the major conclusions from this study: African-American young adults tend to ground religious identity in relationships to family and community, and white young adults in a personally-narrated construction of an idealized, autonomous self. These differing motivations reveal drastic differences in their understandings of human personhood, and this line of analysis likely informs the way forward for understanding African-Americans' place in the US religious landscape.

While I have arranged the analysis of black respondents' interviews into categories as well, I hesitate calling them "narrative personas", for the reasons explained above. The following two categories ought thus to be thought of as describing two types of relationships that African-American young adults exhibit with their family and religious communities, rather than

individual personas. These are: 1) the religiously stalwart, who enjoy lively, dialogic engagement and meaningful fellowship with their religious community, and 2) the religious strayers, who maintain the beliefs of their communities but fail to live up to the standards of behavior expected of them, resulting in stilted, uncomfortable estrangement. As with the narrative personas of white young adults, these relationship types ought to be treated as ideal types rather than discrete empirical categories. Black young adults tend to fluctuate between these relationship types even more frequently than white young adults do between the three narrative personas. Thus, in this analysis I often speak generally about “black young adults” rather than simply “the religious stalwarts” or “the religious strayers”, while still distinguishing between the two types.

### *The Religious Stalwarts*

Those who embody stalwart loyalty to their religion understand themselves to be part of a vibrant community of believers who are guided, protected, and upheld by God as they learn and worship through dialogue, church attendance, and encouraging proper religious practice amongst themselves. Their theological views have both stridently individualistic and collective components to them; in their narratives they emphasize both the developments of their personal relationships with God while frequently speaking of this intersubjectively, as if they share this process with others in their family or religious community, and as if the individual conversion process is aimed at becoming a fuller participant in a community of believers. The mark of genuine spiritual and religious identity for black young adults seems to be entrance into this shared communal faith, rather than in pursuing and achieving merely individual spiritual aspirations. This concurs with way they speak of boundaries in and outside of the religious community; often, they reference a sense of danger and disarray in the world that their collective participation empowers them to withstand and resist.

While many relay stories of how they have overcome seasons of inactivity, temptation, or suffering, the stalwart speak effusively of God and also of their family, kin, and church leaders bringing them back to the faith. In contrast with devout young adults among the white sample, prone to minimize their parents influence on them, black young speak of it frankly, as a matter-of-fact part of their life experiences. One woman speaks appreciatively of her mother's influence on her personal religiosity, particularly in her mother's persistence in getting her to church, "She was always the one who like, If I didn't want to go to church, 'No, Jade, get up, go to church, nope, come on, get up, go to church.'" Another woman explains, "I was raised in church and I just kind of stopped going 'cause I was just more about the party life." But when her Aunt, a pastor, invited her back to church, and she decided to put her partying life behind her. A man explains that when he was living with his Mom, "I had to get up or suffer a whooping. I's like, 'Okay, I'll take church.'"

Black young adults, and especially the religiously stalwart, tend to be thankful rather than resentful that their parents have enforced conformity with religious practices throughout their lives, even when it has gone against their own desires and inclinations. Another man says that his "very religious mother" sends him prayers and scriptures every night, and although he sometimes finds it boring, "I take whatever scripture she has--I mean she says the whole scripture and then where to find it... I'll open my Bible, I do have a Bible that's open, uh, right next to my bed," and he reads them. Another explains about his parents, "Cause I used to always be like 'Aw man, shut up. I don't wanna hear it.' I was like, 'You don't know what you're talking about.' But I never actually listened to them. Until one day I did listen, and I was like, 'Man, you're right...and it's in the Bible.'" Another woman explains, "When I was young, I didn't care about anything. I just wanted to do what I wanted to do. I did disrespect my mom and even if I knew

it was wrong, I just didn't care. I felt like whatever, she's gonna punish me, whatever. And now I know that's what I'm supposed to do.”

In another contrast with devout white young adults, black young adults tend to assert their alignment with others' beliefs as a declaration of their own faith, while white young adults treat this as the ultimate sign of insincerity. One black young adult stresses that his and his mother's beliefs are, “Pretty much similar. Well, not similar, exact.” A woman describes the changes she has made to make religion the basis of her life as a source of pride for both her and her parents, “I'm proud of it because...I know my parents are happy- I know my- it helps my mom feel more comforted with me not being around her is that at least I- my mind is in the right place and my heart is in the right place and my spirit is in the right place. So, it just, it comforts.”

Relatedly, dialogue with parents and relatives serves as a sign of mature spirituality, for these young adults. As they explain their beliefs, the religiously stalwart intermingle their own ideas and convictions with those expressed by their mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. One woman explains, “when in doubt go to my mom. Like, ma, listen, this is what they said, like, is it true? And she'll tell me if it's true or not.” Another remarks, “This world be in trouble and I mean, I think about some of the stuff that, they already takin' like prayer outta school and stuff. And I think to myself, ‘Yeah, that is what my Grandma was talkin' about. That's the end times right there.’ I mean, you know, it's getting closer and closer.” Family members are viewed as authoritative sources of truth, and far from fearing that reliance on them will impede genuine spiritual growth, it seems that spiritually coming of age involves entering the constant stream of religious dialogue among one's family members and religious community. One woman explains that once she saw her faith working her life, “I was able to bring that back to the table with my mom. And we were able to have a different identifying piece.” A man says

that he and his mother frequently discuss religious issues together. “That’s how I learn, that’s how she learns. Absolutely. I enjoy it, yeah. She’s curious to know what I’m thinking, I’m curious to know what she’s thinking so it kind of works out.”

The church experiences they relay are notably less intellectual, doctrine or idea-centric, and individualistic than white young adults depict them to be; rather, church is described as an opportunity for emotionally-charged, energetic, and powerful bonding with family and community. White young adults often portray themselves as distanced, critical agents in church settings, challenging claims they disagree with, participating only on their own terms. Black young adults apparently allow themselves to be emotionally swept up in the experience of church—even when it is uncomfortable for them. In fact, at least one non-practicing young adult cites the emotional gravity of church and its relational effects as his reason for avoiding it, because it reminds him of his deceased grandparents: “When I go to church now, it’s like I be cryin’ ... I think so much about my grandmother and my grandfather. Every time I hear the songs, know what I’m sayin’, it’s like ‘damn’. Now I just think about them and what they used to say...about church and how strongly they affected by it.” Another describes the positive effects of church experience he has observed in his mother. “She’s always been very, uh, she’s been a homebody. She hasn’t been outspoken, but she’s becoming more boisterous; I should say more vocal.... Definitely shows on her day-to-day character.” And another black young adult says he attends church “Cause, I mean, it means something to my father... I mean, I gain something from it, but [my main motivation] is my father.” The following man similarly describes Church as a deeply connecting, relational experience:

It’s a collection of human emotions so if everybody’s gathering in one single area with this certain time of human emotion that... it’s gonna be spread around, kinda like a

butterfly, like its gonna touch every single person that's there because of the massive amount of human emotion it is. You know, just like, when you see somebody cry... it kinda touches you too. May affect you a little bit different, but it kinda touches you, it's like, you know—you may wanna reach out if you're a mother or a father. It's like, 'hey.'

Perhaps it is the emphasis on familial relationships in their religious experiences that prevents black young adults from being exceedingly perturbed by distant others who disagree with them on matters of faith. As they explain their responses to world religions, biblical criticism, and threats to faith, they tend to assert the simple fact of their belonging to a particular religious tradition as sufficient reason for their continued adherence to it. One woman explains that the only thing that could shake her faith would be, "If my mom told me something crazy that she learned and then she stopped believing. I think that would probably be the only thing... Because she is the basis of it. She's the one who introduced it to me. So, I feel like, as long as she's believing, I'm believing." (In notable contrast with the disaffected young adults from the white sample, this woman says it would only be her mother's fall from faith, not her own internal doubt, that would shake her commitment.) When asked how he knows what is true regarding religion, one man says, "I don't. I don't--it's just something I have to believe in." A woman replies, "I think all religions, people with like... high expectations and like, high standards of being good, like keepin' self-confidence, self-motivated, you know? Um but if it were right or wrong, like, I dunno I guess I can only say my religion. My religion is Christian, and that's what I was raised on, so." A man states honestly, "I can't speak for other religions because I've never tried to follow them." From a white perspective on identity, these young adults may seem ignorant, unintentional, insincere, or inauthentic regarding religious matters, but such a judgment clearly does not match the measures of religious sincerity by which they understand themselves,

wherein religious identity is taken as something already bestowed by particular persons they feel inherently bound to, and their primary duty to nurture and honor this inheritance.

The following two examples are especially telling. These African-American women straightly explain that they know their beliefs to be dependent on the particular places and ways in which they were raised, and thus that they cannot merit the fact of their belief as entirely their own doing. But instead of fact challenging to their faith's credibility, or causing embarrassment, they see it as necessitating empathy for those in other circumstances:

I don't argue with anybody else about their beliefs because I could've been born there. I could've been raised that way, and that's what I would believe, so I don't argue with anybody about what they believe in and how they feel and what they feel is right. It's all about what I was raised in, and I continue on striding on what I was taught, and that's all I can do. I can't concentrate on anybody else and what they believe in.

And another:

What I was raised to believe and which I do believe is that one has to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior. That's what I was raised to believe, but one thing that I'm hoping is the fact that if a person is a good person and they may believe in a religion that is different than my own, then I'm hoping that the creator of that person will not condemn them to hell because of that. I'm hoping that the man that I call my father, my heavenly father, would look at that person for who they really are and independent of what book they read and accept them. That's what I'm, I'm hoping, I feel that to be true.

To summarize, religiously stalwart young adults see themselves as having acquired a rewarding and rejuvenating sense of belonging in their families and religious communities. Their pride in this accomplishment is shared intersubjectively, as they understand their spiritual growth

to have involved the support and encouragement of other persons, and express their faith through shared theological dialogue and worship experiences. Their interviews portray reunion with and renewal of their religious heritage, not estrangement from or rejection of it. Although they acknowledge that there are legitimate challenges to faith extant in the world, their faith appears to be grounded in local, particular, and familial circumstances, such that these distant, abstract challenges remain irrelevant.

### *The Religious Strayers*

There are perhaps only one or two blacks in this sample who understand themselves as deliberately rejecting the religion of their family or community. Nevertheless, many openly acknowledge their life decisions and practices have taken them far from the religious expectations that their parents, kin, communities, and sometimes that they themselves carry. Yet in contrast with disaffected young adults, who also experience family estrangement, these African-American strayers do not portray themselves as having acquired a freer, more mature or enlightened stance on religion. They admit that their position is uncomfortable for them and often that they wish their circumstances were different. Some feel misunderstood. Others are disappointed in themselves, feeling they have succumbed to temptation and laziness. Their religious identities, in other words, continue to remain bound to the tradition whose practices they currently disregard; instead of seeing themselves as secular, ex-religious, post-religious, disaffected from religion, or anything in that vein, they understand themselves to have genuinely strayed from the path.

Strayers tend to state their situations in frank, matter-of-fact tones, asserting both their neglect to observe religious expectations for behavior and their commitment to the religious beliefs that upholds the expectations. A woman who has been sleeping with her boyfriend



despite her belief that sex ought to be reserved for marriage, says, “I don’t disagree with [the belief], ya know it’s just something I didn’t follow through with.” A man who doesn’t attend church explains, “It’s not the fact of no faith, this and that, uh--just party too hard. Like going to church today, after what we did yesterday, wouldn’t make it. Wouldn’t make it. I ain’t fitting to go to church and sit here messed up.”

The strayers not only show stunning loyalty to their religious beliefs but also to the practice of prayer, which they maintain even when they have not stepped foot in church for years, live in conscious disregard to religious expectations, and do not intend to reverse their trajectory. They continue to pray in whatever circumstances they find themselves in. A non-practicing African-American man reports, “Me and my homies pray, know what I’m sayin’, cause my friend is locked up right now... And facin’ some real time. So, you know what I’m sayin’, [we] prayed on that.” A woman admits about her lack of church attendance, “to be quite honest I think me working on Sundays is an excuse that I use to make me feel a little bit better... I would think it’s a laziness thing on my part.” And yet she insists, “I pray with my kids a lot, a lot because this world is going to Hell in a handbasket.”

For the most part, strayers maintain polite, deferential respect for their parents’ religious beliefs and expectations, even when they fail to live up to them and know they are not perceived favorably in their parents’ eyes. Their parents’ disapproval often targets not just their neglect of church attendance, but personal vices which affect the family and broader community-- particularly premarital sex, drugs, alcohol use, and lack of financial responsibility. One young adult notes that his parents, “they beef with me about certain things” because he’s still living at home, sleeping on the living room couch, and has had a son out of wedlock. Another says, “My

mom... probably want me to practice a lot more, like she does. Uh, several things I do, like I smoke and I drink. She wants me to quit that, and yeah, she wants me to do more.”

Though they may wish their parents would be gentler on them, or bend their restrictions to accommodate their children’s expectations, they do not seem to expect it, and disagreement on religious matters is not taken as an excuse for showing disrespect for parents. One woman who is in a homosexual relationship that her parents disapprove of remarks candidly that she does not debate with them about it. “I can have a conversation with someone who doesn’t believe what I believe and not get offended or upset but my mother and my father, they cannot. So since I know that to be their reality, we don’t have conversations like that.” The following man seldom attends church but responds deferentially and politely when his mother talks to him about it:

I don’t go to church as often as I should... She doesn’t approve of that, of course she’s not gonna push me into doing it. She just tells me to, you know, I need to go to church.

But she considers my voice an actual voice... She doesn’t treat me like a little child. So, I say ‘Yes, ma’am, of course I do.... I understand I gotta go.’

While some seem ambivalent and resigned to their current religious status, unconcerned with whether or not it will change in the future, many express a desire and an expectation that they will become more practicing later in life. This evidences their continued belief that full religious fellowship is a sign of personal maturity, which they admit to aspiring to even when doing so incurs the embarrassment of having not yet acquired it. Sometimes this maturity process is just a matter of overcoming their personal struggles with motivation and discipline. One woman says she hopes her mother will invite her to join her church retreats because, “that would kind of give me the start that I probably would need to continue. Sometimes I just need that push, something to kind of push me.”

Often, parenthood impels a greater sense of religious urgency, as they desire their children to know what one woman affectionately calls, “their church family.” They speak of religion as the most natural and perhaps the most enduring way of meaningfully sharing life with other people. A young mother who finds church “very boring,” stresses that she soon intends to “stop being a little child” and find some place she likes in order to attend with her son, which she believes is a mother’s imperative. “I told my mom, we gotta find something else because this ain’t workin’.” Another woman explains that having kids has brought about a change in perspective. “I’ve always believed it but I didn’t care like where I went – whether it was heaven or hell. But now I feel like I have to be an example for my kids.” A man shares of his similar trajectory, “As I got older and wanted to be a better man for my wife, wanted to be a better father for my kids, and just be a better person in life, period.”

Religious strayers are virtually in agreement with the stalwart in the characterization of religious and spiritual identity. Both the stalwart and the strayers believe themselves to irreversibly belong to particular religious communities, whether family and kin or specific denominations. They speak of their identities as inherently bound to these given communities, and the details of their current practices and attitudes towards religion are only better or worse responses to this stable identity. While disaffected or conflicted white young adults might selectively adapt or reject religious labels that do not accommodate their fluctuations in practice, disposition, or personal inclinations, for African-American strayers these fluctuations do not entail that radical readjustments be made to religious identity. Far from being ashamed of their boundedness to history, these young adults apparently see the way forward to involve burrowing deeper into that which was given them at birth. They readily admit such even when doing so casts a disparaging view on themselves and their current circumstances.

*Summary*

African-American young adults poignantly represent the limits of even prominent Revisionist theories like Taylor's, which too often suppose religious belief to pivot on intellectual, individual experience. The beliefs informing religious identity for African-Americans in this sample pivot on relational and historical terms, as well. This seems to be a crucial component to the question raised in the beginning of this piece—why African-Americans are more resistant to secularizing influence than white Americans.

Despite overlooking race relations, Taylor's theoretical work allows us to see how these differences are rooted in the distinct—though intertwined—histories of African-Americans and white Americans. Although these black young adults seldom address racial struggle alongside religion, the connection is not difficult to make. Their religious identities stubbornly defy explanation through the lens of “buffered” personhood, yet they make sense when considered in broader historical context of African-American religion. Far more than being reducible to a set of beliefs, doctrines, or practices, African-American religion has functioned as a historical project, aimed at forming strong communities to support each other and resist the consequences of racism embedded in broader American society. Amid this project as well as in its unique theological emphases, individuals are not depicted as free, autonomous agents, but as persons constrained by indifferent others in society, compelled to band together to respond to their collective suffering.

This context sheds light on why fidelity to one's community, rather than independence from it, seems to be the driving motive of religious identity for these African-American young adults. Belief becomes a collective imperative, a response to shared historical conditions, not something to be worked out in individual solitude. To be clear, this does mean that African-American religious belief is unthinking or non-cognitive, but simply that belief is inseparable

from given social and historical circumstances—it is from these circumstances that religious thinking is born and to which it responds.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### *Review and Discussion*

Throughout this piece, I have argued that the sociology of religion ought to rethink the relationship between race and secularity through insights of the latest paradigms in secularization theory. To review, the Orthodox paradigm that has long held sway in the discipline takes an objective, linear view of secularization, casting it as the inevitable decline of religion's social influence in modernity, a direct result of changes to the social structure incurred by industrialization, globalization, technologization, the rise of science, etc. This paradigm has notoriously understood the European case to be generalizable to all peoples and societies, as if it exhibits a universal format for modernity which other societies would eventually follow. A quintessential example of this type of thinking is Peter Berger's thesis in *A Sacred Canopy*, where he argues that the structural fact of religious pluralism prevents religious belief from remaining plausible in modernity. Presuming that religious belief thrives under homogeneous social conditions, the increasing pluralism of modern societies at the hand of structural changes necessarily weakens the social fabric of religion, leading many to shuck it off.

Few sociologists of religion today will defend the universality of such claims, both because heaps of cross-cultural evidence prevent such generalization, and because the discipline has grown warier of Eurocentric bias in its research. Nevertheless, the Orthodox view still goes largely unquestioned when it comes to sub-topics within secularization studies—for instance, race and secularity. Within the Orthodox paradigm, the standard explanation for African-Americans' greater propensity for religion is that due to their marginalization within modern social structures, they are sheltered from the full weight of modernity's secularizing effects. Continually encountering barriers to education, stunted economic success, poor health, family

and neighborhood instability, and a host of other plights resulting from their disadvantaged position within the social structure, they supposedly could not be expected to secularize at the same speed as other Americans. A related explanation, which posits that African-Americans rely on religion as means of coping with suffering, similarly reduces their religiosity to structural location; it assumes their place in the social structure will necessarily incur greater suffering which necessarily requires use of coping mechanisms, such as religion.

My intent has never been to argue that African-Americans do not face these struggles nor that they are irrelevant to the endurance and vitality of black religious collectivities in the 21st century. My argument is first, that the structural explanation for African-Americans' religiosity is seriously outdated and weak if taken as sufficient by itself. It neglects to take African-Americans seriously as interpretive beings whose lived experience reflects a historically-particular way of engaging with the social structure, which explains their religiosity better than citing structure alone. And second, that secular culture in the United States as well as academic studies of secularity are imbued with racialized assumptions regarding human personhood, family, and community that unwittingly reinforce white experience as normative and subsequently justify dehumanizing portraits of African-Americans.

While Revisionist scholars of secularization have long criticized the structural reductionism of the Orthodox paradigm, many still neglect the latter problem, regarding the racial politics of secularity. For instance, Charles Taylor. He models the Revisionist approach by taking up secularity as a substantive phenomenon, articulating with incessant nuance its slow, winding historical development in the North Atlantic world. He insists that structural explanations for secularization have always been inadequate by themselves, as the specific effects that structural conditions bear on religion are contingent on a shared social imaginary, an

interpretive context that enables them to have their particular effects. Secularity in the modern North Atlantic world, he argues, has indeed been spurred by religious pluralism, but only because other developments in the understandings of human goods, human personhood, and the self's relation to community were already in place. Specifically, religious pluralism becomes a threat to private belief only because belief has come to be understood as privatized and cognitivized, the solitary possessions of buffered selves. Also because authenticity culture has further spread the imperative that a proper "buffered" religious identity ought to be constructed on grounds free of historical, familial, or cultural constraint. This imperative motivates persons to minimize the influence of their particular historical circumstances and speak as though their religious or spiritual identity is the product of having considered, freely, all the options available—as demonstrated by the white young adults in this study.

While Taylor might nail his articulation of lived experience for modern white Westerners, he misses the racial component that would clarify the scope of his claims and expose the political circumstances upon which the white experience rests. As we observed in Chapter 2, Taylor and Berger's work on plausibility structures in modernity all assume a premodern beginning of naïve religious belief—a world where due to the ubiquity of belief, "it was virtually impossible not to believe in God" (Taylor 2007: 25). There existed no disjuncture between an individual's sense of reality and the reality illustrated in the social structure—a luxurious notion that religious pluralism in modernity subsequently ruptures. There is no discussion, however, of the consequences pluralism bears on religious belief for those who do not have this relationship to the social structure. The religious collectivities of African-Americans have been wholly shaped and propelled by knowledge that their lived experience relentlessly clashes with that assumed in the social structure. This unique trajectory is such that belief hinges on different



conditions than it would for whites; it seems that in certain ways their disjunctured relation to the social structure crucially precedes, rather than impedes, religious development. As the black young adults in this study exhibited, belief for African-Americans is profoundly relational and historical and far from being a matter merely of private, cognitive, rational deliberation, which both Berger and Taylor assume precedes the adoption of secular consciousness.

The significance of this is far greater than correcting theoretical oversight in studies of secularity. Following Talal Asad's argument, secularity carries particular notions of what it means to be a person as well as what one's relation to authority and social structure ought to be. Insofar as secular culture portends to be a neutral space, enabling greater political inclusion by refraining from speech on religious matters, it silently reproduces these notions as normative and casts a disparaging view on those who do not live or express themselves accordingly. In the case of Europe that absorbs Asad's work, he shows how public and state trust in secularity as means of progress amidst increasingly pluralistic nations ends up reproducing the dominance of white, Europeans over cultural outsiders who do not meet its implicit stipulations of proper personhood—particularly Muslims. His argument resonates with the situation in the United States, where African-Americans' religiosity has long been construed, categorized, and explained in terms emerging from predominantly-white experiences, if not neglected altogether.

This obviously serves to the detriment to African-American communities, but it also leads to an impoverished public imagination for possibilities of living in modernity. African-American lived experience offers alternative ways of conceptualizing human personhood that exposes what may be overlooked naïvetés in white notions of personhood that prevent them from accomplishing the best of their aims, such as the liberation of oppressed individuals. The present empirical study shows how the contrast between white and black young adults in this sample is

not that black young adults are fatally constrained by historical circumstances and white young adults are free; both, apparently, experience themselves as fundamentally bound to a particular place in time, space, and family, being bestowed by their religious upbringings with certain beliefs, relationships, understandings, and expectations for behavior that they themselves did not choose. The difference is that while black young adults seem to readily acknowledge this as fact, white young adults resist their passivity in the face of history, rejecting or refashioning what is given so as to appear the trans-historical, self-determined agents that meet cultural stipulations of personhood. They speak as though to be influenced or bound to one's family or community on religious matters would be cause for great shame. While this may enable a greater level of consistency between behavior and belief and between expressed identity and internal inclinations, offering the private satisfaction and social credibility of "authenticity", it potentially stunts the capacity to encounter and respond to given historical circumstances. African-American communities have arguably managed this more successfully, even if they ultimately lack the political power amongst themselves to independently transform their circumstances to the extent they desire. Religious involvement for blacks very often has—in real time and space—created strong, mutually-supportive, and even innovative communities that share a historical project together. The black young adults in this study demonstrate why this might be the case: they think of themselves as inherently bound to a given historical situation and compelled to be loyal to it.

It seems the strategic narrative crafting evident in white young adults' narratives points to an ironic undoing of the modernist project in its own conceptions of personhood—for while it purportedly aims at refashioning societal structure to meet humanist aims, its energy is often spent in efforts to rhetorically distort, diminish or deny historical relationship to social structure and social impetus. James Cone once remarked that "It is not possible to enslave a people

because they are black and expect them not to be aware of their blackness as the means of liberation” (1970: 49). Perhaps it could also be said of whites, that it is not possible to tell a people that they are inherently free, self-determining agents and expect them to envision themselves as part of a community working for mutual ends. Such individualism has long been connected to the disintegration of white religious communities with the capacity to collectively address societal ills, making the connection between secularization and notions of personhood starkly clear. And this marks only one way in which the unchallenged normativity of white understandings of personhood, family, faith, and community lead to an impoverished public imaginary, with limited possibilities for perceiving and resolving contemporary social issues.

*Weaknesses, Limitations, and Ideas for Further Research*

There are many weaknesses to the foregoing study that might guide future related research, stemming both from the theoretical overview and the empirical study. First, much greater historical expertise than what I provided in Chapter 2 is needed in order to develop the social imaginaries of African-Americans sufficiently to compare with those described in Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. The ideas put forth are only starting points, highly subject to critique and certainly necessitating greater nuance. They were admittedly simplified in order to emphasize what is at stake with this kind of historical analysis—the exposure of racialized understandings of human personhood, family, faith, and community latent in lived experience but which carry weighty political consequences.

There were many voices I omitted and strands of African-American thought I neglected to include. A vital one in particular is African-American freethought, or African-American humanism—forms of secularity emerging from African-American experience that include the voices of Zora Neale Hurston, William Jones, contemporaries like Ta-Naheisi Coates, Anthony

Pinn, Sikivu Hutchinson, and many more. Their insights might be assumed to contradict my thesis, which aims to explain why African-Americans are especially prone to be religious and apparently are resistant to secularizing trends extant among other racial and ethnic groups. While black secularists certainly diversify this picture, in fact they bolster the key points of my argument, affirming that due to their distinct social experiences as a historic people, they are resistant to white secularizing trends. African-American humanism has historically existed in tension with white humanism in parallel with the tension between African-American and white Christianity. Alike, African-American secularity and religion tend to think through embodied experience and historical constraints as crucial to understanding human experience and as the way forward for resolving racial issues, and are prone to critique white religious or secular communities for neglecting these things, for putting forth overly individualistic and cognitive understandings of human beings. These overlaps in critique demonstrate that just as white religion and white secularity are rooted in the same cultural history, so are African-American religion and secularity—which merits deeper analysis on its own terms.

Another related, omitted literature is the budding scholarship on “whiteness”, which I have implicitly referenced throughout but seldom explicitly mentioned. Like “secularity”, whiteness has seldom been talked about substantively, allowing it to be politically deployed as negative space, neutral when it comes to racial matters, and therefore silently reproducing characteristics of white normativity. Academic studies of race have followed suite until recently, as there has arisen greater impetus to assess whiteness as a substantive phenomenon, necessitating sociological analysis as much as, for instance, blackness. Engaging the literature on whiteness would have served to clarify the risks of defining and declaring politically neutral

spaces, such as “secularity”, and highlighted how racial struggle persists even in times and places that are supposedly removed from the battle because of this unconscious move.

Additionally, there are many limitations with the sample used for the empirical study. I am not convinced that NSYR achieved a broad-reaching, representative group of all African-American young adults, though they may have tapped into common experiences all the same. For instance, there were none in the sample who didn't believe in God, only one non-Protestant, and none who understood themselves as secular. Another major weakness is that white young adults, on average, represented higher socioeconomic backgrounds than the black young adults, and had personally achieved higher levels of education. Had the sample size for blacks been larger, it would have been useful to compare black and white young adults of similar socioeconomic status side by side. It would also have been useful to include other racial and ethnic groups in the comparison, and yet indeed the relation between these other groups and secularity are deserving of their own substantial work.

According to Christian Smith (2008), secularization is dying out as a topic of study for sociologists, but hopefully this project has demonstrated the need to revisit it on new terms. There is much more at stake in understandings of secularization than intellectual and historical accuracy; though objectivist theories are seldom endorsed by academics today, they are embedded into our cultural histories, institutions, and social interactions. They inform broad societal conceptions of what it means to be a person, how religious identity ought properly to be constructed, and how one ought to relate to family, community, and social structure. Greater thinking is needed regarding the racial histories and lived experiences assumed in society, as well as the political consequences for those who find themselves excluded from them.

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