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Religion and Modernity in the
French Context: For a New

Approach to Secularization

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The notion that religion and modemity ate mutuaUy exclusive has been a leading theme
oŸ the sociology of religion in France and has been amply confirmed by empirical studies of
religious practice, clerical vocations, and parish culture. But recent work on popular religion,
post-1968 ideological communities, and new religious movements has caUed the presumption
of secularization into question. In fact, the theoretical argument can now be advanced that,
… from being antithetical to modernity, these "renewals" of the religious imagination. Seculariz simply the "decline" of religion but is the process whereby religion organiz
the challenges left by modemity.

"Modernity and religion are mutually exclusive": this expression ha ly represented the simplest way of formulating a major paradigm in th
religious phenomena in Western societies. However, it has been inter
different ways according to the cultural contexts to which it has been app

other than in France has the secularist hypothesis of the "end of religion stood in such a strict sense, not only in terms of the shrinking hold re tions maintain on society, but even more dramatically, in terms of the los

sense on the level of the social body asa whole. My aim will be to e arguments, based on an empirical analysis of the religious field up to th be advanced to support this hypothesis of secularization asa

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of French Catholicism that formed the backbone of research in the sociology of religions until the late 1960s.

An overwhelming majority of these studies were essentially focused on religious practice among the French. This preference could be attributed to the quasi-hegemonic position occupied by Roman Catholicism on the French religious scene and the importance given to attending Mass in the eyes of the Church. Catholic authorities had long been concerned about this problem, because this lack of interest shown by practicing Catholics was the clearest indication of "the religious crisis of the modern world." From the thirties onward more and more pastoral initiatives had been taken by French Catholicism to "rechristianize" a France that had become less and less observant- the Mission of France, founded in 1941, and the Mission of Paris, founded in 1943, were both devoted to the training of missionary priests capable of reconquering the "new pagans" of the suburbs and the factories, and were also supposed to contact lay militants active in the Action Cathotique movements. This vast project, which had been at the heart of a mass of literature since the 1930s (including the famous France: Pays de Mission? by Frs. Daniel and Godin, published in 1943), also nourished the sociological ambition of counting practicing Catholics, an ambition formulated by Gabriel le Brasas early as 1931 in his call "For a Detailed Examination and Historical Explanation of French Catholicism." The dean of the Paris's "Facult› de Droit" Law School, jurist, historian and devout Catholic, Le Bras deplored the lack of systematic studies of the religious life among France's 40,000 parishes: fulfilling his wish to remedy this situation became the foundation of the vast enterprise of self-examination launched by French Catholicism that was synonymous with the name of Fernand Boulard, prior to and after the war (Le Bras, 1931, 1955). To meet this challenge, Canon Boulard established a classification system based on the religious acts performed by Catholic adepts, divided into four groups: the "disaffected," the seasonal conformists, the regular practicing, and the "devout" or "fervent" Catholics. Adopted in most studies of Catholic religious practice in Europe, this classification system still haunts opinion polls and studies in the field of electoral sociology.1
The drawbacks of this Europe

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areas would coincide, if superimposed, over the map of religious disbelief (Boulard and Remy, 1968). However, although the working class North is indeed more observant than the rural Creuse region, the opposition between industrial and agricultural regions is insufficient to explain the contrasts of religious France. Nevertheless, the regions of communication and exchange that are also zones of intense economic activity (port cities, waterways, etc.) are the most "disaffected" regions. Inversely, the "devout regions," bastions of local parish Christianity, are also the most isolated regions economically and the least culturally integrated into modernity.
This coincidence between the map of religious practice and the map of modern (cultural as well as economic) activity seemed to provide conclusive evidence to support the secularist hypothesis of religious decline. The modern world of industry, engineering, the city, and communication is a world in which the voice of the Church is no longer heard -- or heard less and less. The latest

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from the growing contradiction

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iUusion. Whether they accepted or rejected this "mission" implicitly assigned to their work, sociologists of religious facts thus found themselves, more so than others, in an awkward posture" either they had to proclaim, as the sought-after objective, the destruction of their object of research, or postulate, at the cost of their scientific legitimacy, the irreductibility of this object of research. The theoretical development of this discipline since the end of World War II finally led to a solution of this dilemma, which is presented here in a deliberately "schematic" manner. The confrontation with historians, in particular with scholars of the Middle Ages whose work emphasizes the mythical dimension of the vision of "the all-religious France of yesteryear," soon provoked a reexamination of the "dechristianization" postulate (Le Bras, 1963; Remond, 1965). But this critical return of the French sociology of religions to its own hypotheses received powerful impetus from developments in the religious conjuncture itself from the 1960s onwards.

Three particularly important moments along this trajectory should be noted: The first corresponds to the impressive development of theoretical and empirical work on so-called "popular religion" during the years 1965-70. In fact, this question of popular practice -- pilgrimages, prayers, domestic rituals, healing practices -- had never ceased to be of interest to French anthropologists and sociologists: they approached the~e phenomena, in the tradition of nineteenth century folklorists, as hallmarks of a disappearing traditional rural society, much like the residual expressions of an obsolete France, buried henceforth in the depths of history, whose final traces were soon to vanish completely. By provoking such violent and unexpected conflicts in a Catholic population removed from regular observance, the application of the liturgical reforms agreed by the Second Vatican Council had a genuine cathartic impact. The objective pursued by the 3the

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etc.), have succeeded remarkably well -- by quieting themselves down quite a bit -- in their acculturation to the

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of salvation, it may be more or less explicitly postulated that the

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