

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

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occurred when they encountered arguments against the truthfulness of Christianity in seminary. (“You can’t go through seminary and come out believing in God!” joked one pastor.) Some, though, had entertained skepticism from a much earlier point. Rick, a contented minister in the liberal United Church of Christ who attended seminary in part to avoid the Vietnam War-era draft, never had to formally embrace conventional Christian doctrine.

For those tormented by doubt, the meaningfulness of the profession was a solace. “I can be with somebody and genuinely have empathy with them, and concern and love and help them get through a difficult situation,” Jack acknowledged. Wes, a Methodist pastor who felt comfortable continuing to serve his parish even with his doubts, spoke of how much he valued the opportunity to encourage progressive values in the Methodist Church.

The men rarely, if ever, discussed their lack of conviction with others, even though some believed that many fellow ministers experienced similar deficits of faith. “We all find ourselves committed to little white lies,” write Dennett and LaScola. “But these pastors—and who knows how many others—are caught in a larger web of diplomatic, tactical, and, finally, ethical concealment.”

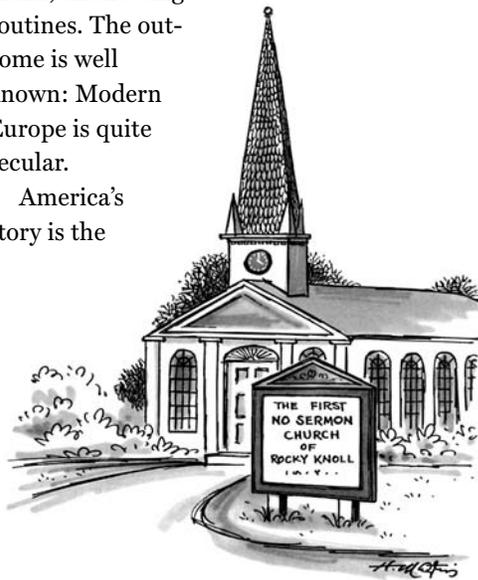
Relax at Your Peril

THE SOURCE: “The Prophet Motive” by John Lamont, in *First Things*, April 2010.

FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH to stay relevant in the 21st century, it needs to stop accommodating modern life and revive a more fundamentalist, demanding approach, proclaims University of Notre Dame Australia philosophy professor John Lamont. Take a lesson from history: If you don’t want to go the way of the dodo, make your religion more extreme.

Over time, churches throughout Europe became too secure in their cozy relationship with the state in their home countries. Operating more or less as monopolies, they did little to compete for new believers, and lapsed into bland, unaffectioning routines. The outcome is well known: Modern Europe is quite secular.

America’s story is the



A church that asks little of the faithful may get exactly that.

opposite. Without state support of any particular faith, religions competed and innovated and, over time, Americans grew more observant. During the Revolution, less than one-fifth of Americans claimed church membership. By the mid-19th century, one-third did so. Today, more than half are church members, and approximately 40 percent attend church once a week (a number that has remained fairly constant since at least the 1930s). The American example contradicts Max Weber and Émile Durkheim’s secularization thesis, which holds that as societies industrialize and advance technologically, populations abandon religion—if you know how to irrigate, you don’t pray for rain.

Competition among faiths does not explain all. There are plenty of examples of societies with state-supported religions and a high degree of religiosity, from the Byzantine Empire to present-day Saudi Arabia. But although demanding religions can exist without competition, when faiths must vie for followers, the more extreme ones will benefit: Potential adherents are attracted to religions that have greater “costs” (such as intense worship or high moral standards) because the

future rewards are perceived to be proportionately greater. Further, Lamont observes, “there is no sociological theory or sociological evidence to support the claim that religions can preserve or increase their influence while lowering their standards and submitting to the society around them.”

In contemporary America, “mainstream Protestant churches that make few demands of their members are declining, and more demanding evangelical or Pentecostal churches are growing,” Lamont says. He contends that the Catholic Church today is losing members because the changes following the Second Vatican Council have erased many of the distinctions between Catholics and non-Catholics, including “rules and distinctive dress for clergy,” and traditional liturgy. Moreover, the church has allowed for and legitimized dissent from its moral teachings. According to Lamont, Catholicism could not have taken steps better calculated to ensure a diminished presence.

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Modern Gods

THE SOURCE: “Rush Hour for the Gods” by William Dalrymple, in *The National Interest*, May–June 2010.

MODERNIZATION BODES CHANGE for country dwellers. In India, even the provincial Hindu gods are not immune to the forces of standardization and commercialization, observes travel writer William Dalrymple, who just

published *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*. But the extinction of tree sprites and snake gods does not mean that India is going the way of Europe and becoming more secular. Rather, religion is becoming uniform, politicized, and, often, fundamentalist—a menace to the pluralism and tolerance that have long characterized the country’s religious life.

Hinduism—a religion with no founder and no single founding text—is by its nature diffuse and multifaceted. As Dalrymple points out, individual deities were long believed to “regulate the ebb and flow of daily life,” right down to the needs of village livestock and the sweetness of well water. It was colonial scholars who “organized the disparate, overlapping multiplicity of non-Abrahamic religious practices, cults, myths, festivals, and rival deities that they encountered across South Asia into a new world religion that they dubbed ‘Hinduism.’”

DVDs, television channels, and the bustle of modern life—who has time to listen to five nights’ worth of a medieval epic poem when the highlights are available on CD?—are “destroying the local and varied flavors of Hinduism.” Local gods and goddesses are giving way to “the national hyper-masculine hero deities, especially Lord Krishna and Lord Rama,” and a national brand of Hinduism is being cultivated by what one scholar describes as “the emerging state-temple-corporate complex.”

Especially among the rising middle class, pilgrimages are extremely popular, and an appetite for new and elaborate rituals has created a shortfall of qualified priests. Aside from the overtly Hindu nationalism purveyed by the Bharatiya Janata Party, religion has infiltrated the state—firmly secular for years after its birth—in subtle ways. Political campaigns for all parties feature mass *pujas* (prayers) and public *yagnas* (fire sacrifices), and state funding for *yagnas*, yoga camps, temple tourism, ashrams, and training schools for Hindu priests has increased dramatically.

In the eyes of India’s urban middle class, Hinduism’s provincial incarnations are nothing more than the superstitions of peasants. This intolerance extends to other religions—most notably, Islam, the faith of some 150 million Indians. As in neighboring Pakistan and elsewhere in South Asia, the mystical version of Islam, Sufism, is under attack, “as the cults of local Sufi saints—the warp and woof of popular Islam in India for centuries—lose ground to a more standardized, middle-class, and textual form of Islam, imported from the Gulf and propagated by the Wahhabis, Deobandis, and Tablighis in their madrassas.”

Though Dalrymple holds out hope that the tradition of syncretic mysticism will remain alive in India, he concedes that in mosques and temples around the country, “identities are hardening.”