

**“CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM” IN THE UNITED STATES?
TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE and HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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For many of those who observe it closely, the current state of conservative Protestantism in the United States is a source of considerable shock. For political liberals, the shock derives from the strength of the movement. They wonder why the United States isn't a “normal” country, like, say, England or Holland, a country where religious belief is much quieter, and church-going much rarer. For religious conservatives, on the other hand, it is the weakness of conservative Protestantism that is the source of shock. They wish the US could become a “Christian nation” once again, a country aware of the providential link between public morality and national greatness. How can two sets of observers arrive at such disparate assessments of the same phenomenon? The purpose of this essay is to critique and move beyond these assessments by placing the folk theories and the phenomenon itself within a comparative-historical context.

Any comparative and historical analysis necessarily takes a particular set of comparisons and a particular period of history as its starting point, and that starting point inevitably influences the questions that arise and the answers that result. This essay is no exception to that rule, so I would like to be clear about what my starting point is. It lies in the Reformation Era in Western Europe, a subject I studied intensively before become

interested in modern America. When set against that background, the title of this essay is transformed into a question, even a perplexity: “conservative” Protestantism *in the United States*?! Why the perplexity? There are several reasons. One is that the two traditions which constitute the theological and organizational core of conservative Protestantism at the moment – the Reformed and the Baptist – are typically categorized as “radical” or even “revolutionary” within the early modern historiography. And not without reason: Calvinists have been variously charged with inventing capitalism, fomenting revolution, and promoting democracy; Max Weber described the Calvinist ethos as one of “world-mastery” and “world-transformation”, terms one does not immediately associate with political conservatism. As for the Baptists, they were tried and convicted of a variety of radical misdeeds, including antinomianism and free love and, later, of pacifism and sectarianism. How then, one wonders, does one get from Cambridge, MA to the Westminster Seminary? Or from Thomas Müntzer to Billy Graham?

If the notion that American Protestants are conservative is one source of puzzlement, the other is that conservative Protestantism should have come to be seen as something specifically and peculiarly American. In this case, we need only think back a century or so to see just how surprising this state of affairs really is. In 1900, when many of their European counterparts were still desperately clinging to the “marriage of throne and altar”, American Protestants had long accepted the separation of church and state (at least as it was then understood). In some countries, such as Norway and the Netherlands, conservative Protestants were going so far as to organize political parties to protect their churches, their schools and their families against the twin onslaught of secularism and liberalism. Meanwhile, the temperance movement and other moral crusades

championed by many Protestants in the United States attracted equal or greater amounts of support in certain parts of Europe. It was not at all obvious then that the United States would eventually become the global epicenter of conservative Protestantism. Which raises an important question: How, and in what sense(s) did the majority of American Protestants come to see themselves as “conservative”?

These are not easy questions to answer. They are slippery, and hard to get a hold of. What makes them so slippery is that the terms “conservative” and “Protestant” are not analytical or theoretical categories whose meaning can be fixed by definitional fiat. Rather, they are practical and political terms whose meanings are themselves sources and sites of conflict. Even within the narrower confines of recent American history, “conservative” is a polysemous term that contains multiple dimensions and layers of meaning, which are not necessarily consistent with one another: “small government” and “strong defense”, “conservation” and “free markets”, “strict constructionism” and “law and economics”, “Biblical literalism” and “confessionalism”, “traditional values” and “libertarianism”, “neoconservatism” and “isolationism”. And the meanings of the term become even more varied if we look at the longer sweep of American history. The content and boundaries of “Protestantism” have also been a subject of ongoing dispute. The old Protestant “mainline”, dominated by the New England “establishment”, were quite hesitant to accept the holiness and Pentecostal movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries into their confessional family. Today, the denominations to which these movements gave birth (e.g., Nazarenes and Assemblies of God) are at the core of the new (conservative) Protestant establishment.

This is not to deny that terms such as “conservative” and “Protestant” can acquire relatively stable and widely shared meanings within a given context or community – amongst Protestant theologians or evangelical activists or foreign policy pundits or neoliberal economists. Nor is it to deny that the phrase “conservative Protestantism” can serve as a rallying cry or source of solidarity amongst these groups. It is simply to emphasize that shared understandings of the term, to the extent they exist, are the result of considerable symbolic and organizational work, and that the resulting constructions are not necessarily logically coherent or politically enduring. And it should be noted that much the same can be said of religious categories such as “evangelical”, “liberal”, “fundamentalist”, “literalist” and so on. In understanding the emergence and composition of conservative Protestantism, then, we need to be attuned to shifts and accretions in what terms like “conservative” and “evangelical” mean, and to the changing constellation of theologies and ideologies, denominations and parties, movements and groups, that are associated with them.

It would not be possible to trace these shifts and accretions in an exhaustive or systematic manner within the space of a single essay, and I will not try to do so here. What I will try to do is to enumerate some of the key turning points in the story and identify some of the key mechanisms that underlie them. In doing so, I will often invoke cross-national comparisons, mostly between the United States and the (predominantly) Protestant countries of Northern Europe. For reasons of space, these comparisons will necessarily be rather brief and stylized. My goal here, then, is a modest one: I will not pretend to provide definitive answers; my goal is to sharpen questions and develop hypotheses. Our first task must be to construct the object we wish to explain –

“conservative Protestantism” – and to do that we must deconstruct two folk constructions of it.

Deconstructing the Object: The Two Tropes of Conservative Protestantism

Pierre Bourdieu often said that the first task of sociological analysis is to “construct the object” – to delineate the social object that we wish to explain. And one of the great banes of the social sciences, he continued, is that they so often take “preconstructed objects” as their objects. By preconstructed objects he meant objects that have already been constructed outside the scientific field by lay actors. The reason we need to be wary about importing such objects into the scientific field, he cautioned, is that they are quite happy to tell us their life-stories, but inevitably do so in a self-interested and one-sided way that invariably distorts or omits important facts. He therefore counseled that social scientists avoid such objects altogether. Unfortunately, that is not always possible. Insofar as social science aspires to be a practical science that responds to the “questions of the day”, it must sometimes take on objects that are not of its own construction. In such cases, I would argue, one must begin by deconstructing and reconstructing the object, by uncovering the distortions in their constructions and, ultimately, making the distortions part of what needs to be explained. That is the procedure I will follow here. “Conservative Protestantism” is a paradigmatic example of a preconstructed object. And in assessing it, we need to be skeptical of the descriptions given by aggressive and upbeat salespeople (conservative Protestant leaders) or their

jealous and angry neighbors (liberal secular intellectuals), even, or perhaps especially, if this means being critical of ourselves.

Of course, it is much easier to criticize others, so I will begin with the account of conservative Protestantism favored by the conservative Protestants themselves, what I will call the covenant/apostasy/revival trope (CART). The CART, recounts American history, and indeed any history, as a story in three acts: a primordial golden age of religious faith and social order (“covenant”), which is followed by a period of religious apostasy and social decline, necessitating an age of religious revival and social restoration. The golden age begins with a founding agreement between the Christian God and the American people. When the people fall away from the covenant, God punishes them by withdrawing his blessings and unleashing his wrath. To win back God’s grace, the people must return to the covenant. The trope is an old and enduring one. It is rooted in the Old Testament, played a pivotal role in the development of European nationalism, was inserted into the Mayflower compact, and has remained a fixture of Protestant narratives about America ever since. Today, it can be found in history texts for Christian homeschoolers, in the jeremiads of Christian nationalist clergymen, and even in the writings of some conservative Christian historians.

Anyone who wishes to squeeze American history into this narrative structure must answer three sets of questions: 1) In what sense is America a “Christian nation” chosen by God? 2) When was America founded and by whom? 3) When did America fall away from the covenant and with what consequences? Let us examine how contemporary conservatives address each of these questions. Answers to the first question fall under three main headings: sociological, comparative, and historical.

Sociological answers highlight the predominance of Christian beliefs and practices, such as belief in God and membership in a church, in surveys of the American populace. Comparative answers emphasize the prevalence and intensity of Christian faith in America, particularly as compared to Europe. And historical answers emphasize the role of Christian people and principles in the founding of the nation. All of these answers are of a considerable lineage. The second question, regarding the founding, has only two possible answers, which are not necessarily exclusive of one another: the first emphasizes the Puritan settlement of New England, the second the Christian character of the nation's founding fathers and foundational principles, especially as set out in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but also in other pre-Revolutionary charters and laws. As regards the third question, the breaking of the covenant, the most common answer by far is the 1960s and early 1970s. Conservative Protestant writers focus on this period, not only because of the "counterculture" but also, and perhaps even more, because of a series of landmark Supreme Court decisions, which, in their view, undermined the influence of "traditional Judeo-Christian values" in America and expelled Christianity from the "public square."

Obviously, the CART generates a number of rather serious problems, which conservative Protestant authors are often at great pains to resolve – or conceal. One of these problems is political in nature. It derives from the claim that America is a "Christian nation." Obviously, this is not simply a statement of sociological fact; it is also the enunciation of a political program, a program for the "re-Christianization" of America, which is premised, not only a specific vision of America, but also on a specific understanding of Christianity, a vision and an understanding that is rejected not only by

“secular humanists”, but also by liberal Protestants and even a good number of evangelicals. Christian nationalists attempt to gloss over this problem by eliding the distinction between the descriptive and prescriptive senses of the phrase “Christian” and “nation.” They imply that true Americans are conservative Christians and vice versa.

Where the founding is concerned, however, the problems are empirical in character. If the founding is located in Puritan New England, for instance, what are we to make of the Middle and Southern colonies, especially insofar as they were founded on commercial charters, instead of religious covenants. The colonists of early America were not all religious refugees, they included a good many economic opportunists and more than a few political radicals, and this pattern obtains for post-Revolutionary America as well. If the founding is located in the Revolution, a different set of problems arises. There is, first of all, the simple fact that many of the founding fathers can hardly be described as Christians, much less orthodox Christians, whether by contemporary or historical standards. Nonetheless, a veritable army of amateur historians has mined the words of the founders in search of theistic language – “creation”, “providence” and so on – which they present as “proof” of Christian orthodoxy. A second and related problem concerns the influence of liberal political philosophy on the laws and institutions of the United States. Conservative Protestant writers attempt to circumvent this problem by arguing that since liberal theorists like Locke and Montesquieu were practicing Christians, their philosophies are not liberal but Christian.

What, finally, of the covenant? To suggest that it was closely observed until 1963 taxes the imagination. What, then, of “Indian removal”, the slave trade, and Jim Crow, to name only the most infamous breaches? One could, of course, argue that the 1960s

represent only the latest violation, as some, more historically informed writers have done (Reed 1996). But what is one to make of the civil rights movement and the desegregation laws? While some Southern Protestants of an earlier generation – Jerry Falwell, say – might have suggested that these laws were of a piece with *Roe v. Wade*, that is a position that very few of them – including Jerry Falwell – would be willing to defend today. These anomalies have not deterred conservative Protestant social critics from asserting a close connection between the breaking of the covenant and various indicators of social breakdown -- illegitimate births, divorce, crime and so on. Some of this literature employs a prophetic mode of historical interpretation, in which obscure events become “signs of the times”, and hidden conspiracies abound. Perhaps the most important feature of these works – and the thing that puts them most sharply at odds with the work of professional historians, religious or secular – is their assumption that the lines of historical and eschatological time must move in parallel with one another, and that the main task of historical interpretation is to divine the connection between them. It might be imagined that this makes such narratives less convincing to their readers. In fact, the opposite is probably true. For an audience familiar with literalist forms of Biblical exegesis, and schooled in prophecy seminars, however, history written in the CART is undoubtedly quite resonant and probably more convincing than the work of professional historians.

Whatever its weaknesses as a historiographical schema of the American past, the CART provides a strong frame for conservative Protestantism. Like any good movement frame, it identifies a problem (social decline), its causes (religious apostasy), and its solution (evangelical revival). Further, it employs a language of covenant and a

hermeneutics of prophecy that is deeply inscribed in, and highly resonant with, a large segment of the American population. Finally, it has built-in bridgeheads to other conservative frames. For example, its emphasis on American exceptionalism and national greatness can easily be bridged with the neoconservative emphasis on unilateralism and militarism. Similarly, its emphasis on individual morality as the true solution to moral problems is not incompatible with the neoliberal celebration of free market solutions to policy problems as well as with libertarian antistatism. Even less effort is required to bridge the conservative version of CART with the concerns of (secular) “values conservatives”, insofar as it emphasizes the importance of “moral absolutes.” Lastly, the quasi-Jeffersonian vision of the real America of small towns and private property resonates strongly with sectional resentments that pit the rural areas of the “Heartland”, and especially the South, against the secular cultural elites of the big cities and the coasts. In sum, the CART is a strong frame with high resonance and considerable bridging capacities.

Seen through the lens of the CART, the current strength of conservative Protestantism needs no explanation whatsoever. From this perspective, conservatives Protestants are the true heirs and the best guardians of the religious and national traditions of America. For them, the real puzzle is their (supposed) weakness. And the villains in the story, naturally, are secular humanists and their liberal and nominally Christian fellow travelers.

The CART may be unfamiliar to some readers, but the second trope I wish to discuss should be familiar to most. I will call it the “tradition/modernity/secularity” trope

(TMST). It should be familiar, because it is the dominant narrative in learned and liberal discourse about religion. It frames most academic and progressive discussions, not only of conservative Protestantism, but of global “fundamentalism.” For that reason, some readers may be surprised to see the TMST presented as a folk theory, with the same epistemological status as the CART. But the TMST enjoyed a long career as a political slogan that antedates its recent promotion to the rank of a scientific theory. A brief review of its changing meanings is sufficient to illustrate this point. During the Middle Ages, the term “secular” was a residual term, which referred to those things that were not of religion or the church, as in “secular education” or “secular rulers.” Its properly political career begins in the Reformation era, albeit under a slightly altered name, when the term “secularization” was used to denote expropriation, specifically, the seizure of church property by the state. During the epic church/state battles of the late 19th century, these two meanings were combined; “secularization” came to mean the removal of various functions or institutions from the control of the church, particularly education and the schools. “Secularization”, then, was an integral part of the development of the modern research university and the class of worldly priests who inhabit it, and indeed for the autonomy of other fields of cultural production as well (art, literature, music and so on), all of which had been subject to clerical authority and ecclesiastical patronage to one degree or another. Academic theories of secularization and modernization were, among other things, an effort to present this outcome as “natural” and “inevitable”, which it most assuredly was not. Like the CART, the TMST is therefore an interested account that must be deconstructed and critiqued before a genuinely scientific account of secularization can begin.

The arc of the plot inscribed in the TMST is simple enough: it begins with “traditional society”, which is suffused with religion, and it concludes with “modern society”, which is inherently “secular.” The plot development is driven by an irreconcilable tension between religion and modernization, which is gradually but inevitably resolved in favor of the latter, and irreversibly so. The narrative is a flexible one, because its key categories – “traditional”, “modern”, “secular” – are elastic and can be filled with a variety of different contents. For example, the terms “tradition” and “traditional” are often associated or equated with notions like “small”, “simple”, “unified”, “community”, “oppression”, “supernatural” and “irrational.” The terms “modern” and “modernity”, on the other hand, are then associated or equated with a series of opposed notions like “growth”, “complex”, “diverse”, “individual”, “freedom”, “scientific”, and “rational.” These terms refer to two forms or states of social life, which define the beginning and the end of a historical process. That process, the process that drives the plot, is “modernization.” It, too, is a highly elastic concept that is typically filled with some subset of the following: “economic growth”, “social differentiation”, “individualism”, “liberation”, “scientific revolution”, and “industrial revolution.” “Secularity”, finally, refers to the consequences of modernization for religious life. It is normally defined as involving one or more of the following: differentiation of church and state, loss of social functions/power, privatization of individual belief/practice, decline of aggregate levels of belief/practice. It tends to be conceived in negative terms as an absence, a contraction, shrinkage or a decline. Given the savaging which concepts like “tradition” and “modernity” have received from academic critics over the last three decades, and the

Because of the rich stock of conceptual elements it contains, the TMST allows for many different opening scenes and chapter headings. Some accounts of secularization begin before the birth of Christ, others in the early Twentieth Century, and many others somewhere in between, with the Protestant Reformation, say, or with one “revolution” or another (the Copernican, the French, the Industrial, or the Darwinian). These historical events can also serve as chapter headings in a multi-stage account, as can social processes such as “urbanization”, “democratization”, or “liberation.” Modernization can thus be emplotted around key “turning points” as well as around cumulative processes.

Where the trope is perhaps somewhat less flexible than its declensionist/revivalist competitor is with regards to plot sequencing. In the DART, reversals and rebellions are an expected and integral part of the plot dynamics. They serve the purpose of moral renewal and revival and bring the plot closer to a resolution. In the TMST, by contrast, there is no obvious place for “backsliding” and “prodigal sons.” It is a triumphalist trope, in which modernization and secularization are expected to move forward in an irreversible and lockstep fashion.

This is one reason, though certainly not the only reason, why the “sudden” emergence of the “Christian right” caught so many academic observers and political liberals off-guard: it violated the plot sequence. Literalist, supernaturalist, traditionalist religion had been slated for extinction. Suddenly, it was back from the grave. What’s more, it had company – rude company. The Moral Majority was established in 1978. It was followed by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 – a furious one-two punch that threatened to topple the TMST for good.

What to do about this unexpected anomaly? While some concluded that the TMST was fatally flawed – more on them below -- others sought to stabilize it. They deployed two main lines of argumentation. The first might be called American anomalism; it is a variety of American exceptionalism. According to this argument, America is, and always has been, different from Europe in matters of religion. Thus, we should not be surprised if America diverges from Europe along this dimension. The second evokes a “backlash against modernity.” According to this argument, modernization can spark counter-reactions if it proceeds so rapidly that “backward” and “traditional” segments of the population do not have sufficient time to “adjust” to its demands.

While the first argument contains an element of truth – the relative strength of conservative Protestantism in America does of course stem from certain differences in its institutional structure and historical trajectory – it homogenizes American history and distorts European history. The homogenization is both temporal and geographical. It is temporal, insofar as it ignores the ebbs in the tides of American history – the decades between the Revolution and the Second Great Awakening, for instance, or the “religious depression” that coincided with the economic depression of the 1930s and 1940s. And it is geographical, insofar as it ignores the “unchurched” and even irreligious character of the 18th century frontiers and the antebellum South – and thus, the anomalous coincidence of “tradition” and “irreligion.” The distortions of European history are similar in nature. For the sake of brevity, consider the case of France, which has a special significance in the American debate. One of the few things that liberal secularists and conservative Christians agree on, is that the French Revolution destroyed French

Catholicism and hastened the triumph of secularism in Europe. In truth, this is a highly anachronistic and tendentious reading of French history. The post-Revolutionary era witnessed a remarkable efflorescence of French Catholicism, which remained a powerful force in French society until well into the 20th century. When the Germans invaded France during World War I, French Catholics organized numerous processions and prayer vigils, called their countrywomen and –men to repent, and argued that the Germans would be repelled if, and only if, the emblem of the Sacred Heart of Jesus were emblazoned on all French battle flags. Meanwhile, in America, religiously conservative political leaders such as Williams Jennings Bryan argued vigorously against participation in that war.

The second argument – “fundamentalism” as “backlash” – also contains an element of truth: conservative Protestantism does arise out of a complex conjuncture of social transformations. But the concept of “modernization” is far too blunt an instrument to parse and describe these conjunctures and transformations. Conservative Protestantism and other forms of global fundamentalism are not reactions against “modernity” *tout court*. Their relationship to modern technology, for example, is often a positive one. Indeed, the success of these movements is largely the result of their adept and innovative uses of modern communications technologies. Similarly, many forms of “modern” political organization and tactics, including political parties, voluntary associations, transnational networks, and single-issue movements, appear to have been invented by religious activists.

Given its manifest empirical and conceptual weaknesses, one wonders why the TMST has survived so long and been defended so vigorously. This is all the more

puzzling, given that modernization theory was expunged from most accounts of political and economic development long ago. Why, then, has it survived in accounts of religious development right up to the present day? One answer, I believe, is that it has enabled liberal secularists to conceal the political content of secularization from others and, not least, from themselves, by portraying it as an inevitable and impersonal process, driven by scientific truth rather than as political program driven by group interests. This strategy has been all the more effective to the degree that “secularization” is conceived as the evacuation of religion from the secular realm, rather than the displacement of one form of sacrality (the religious) by another (the secular). But as Talal Assad and others have shown, secularity is itself a “religious” formation, albeit an anti-transcendental and innerworldly one, insofar as it invests certain objects (the individual, the environment, science and so on) with a sacred status. One need not be a cultural relativist to see that the definition of legitimate truth is not the only thing at stake here. Also at stake is the distribution of cultural power. When conservative Protestants rage against the power of “cultural elites” and “secular humanists”, who would destroy “tradition” and “religion”, while offering nothing to replace them, they are only half wrong.

This is not the only thing that perpetuates the TMST, however. Another is the CART. As should be clear by now, they are mirror images of one another. Both agree that “modernity” is at odds with “religion.” What they disagree about is the solution. One proposes the recovery of “tradition”, the other an embrace of “secularity.” Whatever one may think about the normative issue that is at stake – viz, the proper place of religion in public life – it should be evident that moving out of this hall of mirrors is an important

first step towards a more scientific understanding of conservative Protestantism. The next section attempts to move in this direction.

Reconstructing the Object: Putting “Conservative Protestantism” in its Space

In the underlying ontology of the CART, “conservative Protestantism” is tacitly conceived as an unchanging set of religious ideas (a “tradition”) and/or a self-reproducing group of religious adherents (a “community”). It is an unchanging entity that moves through historical time. In the underlying ontology of the TMST, by contrast, “conservative Protestantism” is represented either as an organism that has outlived its normal lifespan and/or as an anomalous byproduct of non-religious forces (economic, demographic and so on). As we have just seen, neither set of assumptions is historically adequate. Pace the CART, the ideology and sociology of “conservative Protestantism” have changed substantially over time. Conservative Protestantism is not a monad. Neither, however, is it an organism or an epiphenomenon. It does not have a lifespan. Nor can it be described or explained from a purely externalist perspective. Religious ideas and communities have their own logics and structures.

So, how *should* we conceive of conservative Protestantism? Before proposing an answer to this question, I would like to spell out the theoretical assumptions that underlie that answer. These assumptions are drawn mainly from two sources: Max Weber’s sociology of religion and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social fields. In brief, I assume that: 1) a society is composed of a certain number of social fields and sub-fields that are relatively autonomous from one another (minimally, a political, cultural and economic

field); .2) all sub/fields are composed of a hierarchy of positions with a corresponding distribution of rewards (typically, some mixture of power, wealth and prestige) and are the site of an ongoing struggle over the distribution of rewards; 2) actors' dispositions are deeply influenced by their positions within, and trajectory through a field, as are their dis/affinities vis-à-vis other actors, so that individuals and groups will be apt to ally with actors in homologous positions in other fields, but that 3) the multiplicity and complexity of fields is such, that the groupings and alliances which arise will depend upon the outcome of symbolic and material struggle, particularly within and between elites across the various fields.

To these very general presuppositions, I would add a number of more specific corollaries regarding religion: 1) the religious sub-field is part of a larger cultural field that includes "secular" forms of cultural production (e.g., "art" and "science"); 2) the most salient lines of vision and division within the religious field are typically between: a) dominant and subordinate and orthodox and heterodox factions of the clergy (as opposed to the clergy as a whole vs. the laity); 3) one of the most salient lines of division within the cultural field as a whole is between religious elites (clerical *and* lay) and non-religious elites (secular intellectuals); 3) like all fields, the religious field is a site of continuing struggle and contestation over, inter alia: a) accession to and control over elite positions; b) the "proper" boundary between clergy (elites) and laity (masses); c) the theological content of orthodox religion and its proper boundaries vis-à-vis heterodox religion; and d) the proper boundaries and relations between religious and secular actors and ideas; 4) the dynamics and outcomes of such struggles will be the product, not only of struggles within the religious field or even the cultural field, but also of the ways in

which, and the degree to which, these specifically religio-cultural conflicts intersect and interact with conflicts in other fields as well, particularly the economic field, with its class struggles over material resources, and the political field, with its partisan struggles over political power.

Viewed through this set of theoretical lenses, “conservative Protestantism” appears, not as an unchanging ideological position or religious community as in the CART, nor as a historical anachronism or structural byproduct as in the TMST; rather, it can be conceived in two distinct but interrelated ways: 1) statically as an alliance between certain positions and principles in the religious, political and economic fields; 2) dynamically as an ever-changing flow of positions and principles through this location in social space. This conceptualization avoids the monistic and anachronistic vision of the CART as well as the ahistorical and reductionist vision of the TMST.

Let us begin with a static view that defines conservative Protestantism in *religious* terms, meaning theological and denominational terms. While there is naturally some disagreement about who is and is not a “true” conservative Protestant, among both observers and participants – and inevitably so! – the theological orthodoxy is sufficiently stable at the moment that the disagreement is not great. One might define an orthodox conservative Protestant as someone who believes with all or most of the following claims and a heterodox conservative Protestant as someone who is skeptical about a number of them: 1) *Biblical literalism*: a) the Bible is a divinely-inspired text; b) it is to be read literally and historically, not allegorically or mythologically; c) hence, the creation story in Genesis is a factual description of real events; 2) *Arminian soteriology*: Salvation is: a)

made possible by Jesus' atonement; b) freely available to all who choose to accept Christ as their personal savior; and c) only available to those who experience being born again.

3) *Premillennialist Eschatology*: at the end of days, a) true Christians will be raptured into heaven; b) those left on earth will undergo a period of tribulation; c) Jesus will then return to rule the earth.

The denominational core of conservative Protestants is Baptist. Other key constituents include: a) conservative breakaways from "mainline" or "liberal" Protestantism (e.g., Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, or the Presbyterian Churches of America); b) churches rooted in the "holiness" tradition (e.g., Churches/Assemblies of God); c) Pentecostals; d) Mormons. The theological and denomination definitions are not wholly congruent. For example, insofar as they remain orthodox Calvinists, conservative Presbyterians are of the Arminian soteriology of most evangelical denominations. Baptists, on the other hand, may be skeptical of Pentecostal soteriology, insofar as it insists on "baptism in the Holy Spirit." Further, many conservative Protestants do not regard Mormons as Christians. This list of fractures could easily be expanded, of course.

Conservative Protestantism can also be defined in *political* terms, to include all Protestants who espouse a certain political orientation, irrespective of their theology. Political orientation can be defined in terms of policy positions and/or party orientation. Here, too, the orthodox meaning of "conservative Protestantism" is relatively stable at the moment, though not uncontested. As is well known, "conservative Protestantism" is associated with opposition to gay marriage, abortion, pornography. In terms of party, of course, conservative Protestants are overwhelmingly to Republicans. The point that must

be emphasized here is that the overlap between religiously and politically conservative Protestants is also far from complete. Politically conservative Protestants can be found in mainline and even liberal denominations. Conversely, politically liberal Protestants can be found in evangelical and fundamentalist denominations.

We can also analyze conservative Protestantism *socio-economically*, that is, in terms of class position and policy preferences. The results will depend upon whether we begin with a denominational or theological definition. If the former, then “conservative Protestants” have levels of education, income and occupational attainment that are lower than most other groups (e.g., Greeley and Hout). If the latter, however, then the results become decidedly more mixed and ambiguous (Smith 1998, 76-82). The likely reason is that denominations labeled “evangelical” or “fundamentalist” have a skewed socio-demographic profile, leading some individuals with conservative Protestant theologies to join mainline and liberal churches with higher status. As regards economic policy, the results are similarly paradoxical. On the one hand, the individual voting behavior of (denominationally) conservative Protestants is more strongly influenced by their attitudes towards economic inequality than that of other groups. On the other hand, taken as a group, they are more averse to government-led efforts to reduce inequality than are other groups. (Hout and Greeley)

A fourth and final field in which we can fruitfully situate conservative Protestantism is “the nation”, understood as both a geographical and a discursive space. The distribution of conservative Protestants across geographical space is hardly random. They are most heavily concentrated in the South. Their distribution in discursive space is also skewed. They are not simply more apt to be proud of America than other groups,

they are also more apt to be proud of America's political and military influence throughout the world, and to believe that America has a mission to transmit its values and institutions to others. In other words, they are not simply more nationalistic; their vision of the nation is one that emphasizes power and influence. (Hout and Greeley) Thus, while conservative Protestants favor a state that enforces morality and projects power, they oppose a state that redistributes wealth.

Let us now shift to a dynamic perspective. First, a disclaimer: I will not, and cannot provide a detailed or exhaustive description of all the important flows and conjunctures in this context. What I will try to do, is to highlight a number of changes and continuities that social scientists frequently overlook because of the temporal parameters of their research and analysis. My aim, then, is modest: to challenge conventional framings of the problem and to amend the list of explananda. I will do so by identifying some new problems, sketching some tentative answers, and reflecting on the results.

Theology and Class Conflict: The Strange Triumph of Arminianism.

Most of what social scientists read and write about the theology of conservative Protestants takes the rise of Protestant fundamentalism as its starting point, and identifies the publication of *The Fundamentals* and the drama of the Scopes Trial as the seminal events. The key feature of conservative Protestant theology, the object in need of explanation, then becomes its literalist hermeneutics, creationist cosmology, and premillennialist eschatology – the issues which set it apart from the liberal Protestant

theology that gradually took hold during the 19th century. This framing of the question already contains its own answer: conservative Protestantism can then be explained either as a “backlash against modernity”, the dominant approach and the one favored by hostile observers; or it can be portrayed as an act of self-defense in a war on religion, a heterodox approach favored by some more sympathetic observers. Such accounts can easily be folded into the overarching narratives of the TMST and the CART.

But if we push the temporal parameters back to the colonial era, the most striking transformation is a rather different one: the strange triumph of Arminianism. It is a strange triumph, because Arminius’ voluntarist and individualist soteriology is radically at odds, not only with the predestinarian theology of the orthodox Calvinists who dominated early New England, but also with the institutionalist and even sacramentalist soteriology of the Anglicans who came to dominate the Middle Colonies. Of course, the decline of Calvinism started early, most famously with the “halfway covenant” that opened the church doors and later the Lord’s Supper to those in outward conformity with the law. But it was a long decline, nonetheless, and the distance traveled was almost immeasurable: from the congregations of Cotton Mather and James Blair to the born-again and church shoppers of today. Orthodox Calvinists have not disappeared from the scene, of course. But they have become a small minority. Ironically, they are now a part of an evangelical community dominated by Arminians.

How might we explain this strange triumph? Certainly not as a “backlash against modernity.” After all, what could be more “modern” than personal transformation and individual choice? It would probably be more plausible to explain it as a product or even a progenitor of modernity. A more fruitful line of analysis, and one more consonant with

the approach developed here, would focus on struggles in the religious field, both within and between the clergy and the laity. Simplifying greatly, one could argue that the voluntarism and individualism of Arminian theology was a potent weapon in the hands of heterodox fractions of the clergy and subordinate members of the laity, who allied with one another in a struggle against “the New England Way” and of later coalitions of social, clerical and sectional elites, such as the Northern “liberal Protestantism” of the late 19th century, the eventual target of the Fundamentalist rebellion. If we understand “democracy” in the more sociological and Tocquevillian sense, as egalitarianism in social interactions and cultural norms, then Arminianism has been a democratizing ideology par excellence.

Denominations and Parties: Congregationalists and Baptists Play “Trading Spaces”

Generally speaking, social scientists have been much more concerned with accurately categorizing and coding denominations than with following their political careers across history. (e.g., Steensland et al). And those who have done so, have rarely followed them back past 1950, and never past 1900 (e.g., Niebuhr, Roof and MacKinney). Not that this is always a useful exercise. Some denominations have not been particularly mobile. Consider the studied centrism of the Methodists. But others have led more dramatic political lives. Take the Congregationalists and the Baptists. Both have been quite mobile, one leftward, the other rightward. Indeed, one could say that they have traded spaces. The Baptists began their career as an upstart heterodoxy with affinities for political radicalism both in the colonial period and during the early

Republic. Today, as we have seen, they are the core denomination of the Christian Right. The Congregationalists have taken the reverse trajectory. Having started as the established orthodoxy, at least within New England, they have evolved into a bulwark of liberal heterodoxy, with strong affinities for the left.

How might we explain such a dramatic reversal? Since Niebuhr, the changing political orientations of American denominations have usually been explained in terms of an escalator effect. It is an escalator with three steps: a) a new denomination arises out of a subordinate (social) stratum; b) as a result of their newfound moral discipline, members of the domination become more prosperous; and c) as a result of their increased prosperity, they eventually become more conservative. Unfortunately, the escalator mechanism does not account for the trading spaces dynamic. It can explain how a Baptist becomes a Whig (or how a Pentecostal or a Mormon becomes a Republican). But it cannot tell us why a Congregationalist stops being a Federalist (or a why an Episcopalian becomes a Democrat). There are two fundamental problems with the escalator model: economism and reductionism. Social stratification is not limited to the economic field; the religious subfield and cultural and political fields also have their own specific forms of inequality. Nor can political orientation be reduced to socio-economic position; partisan alignment is also influenced by forces emanating from the other sub/fields.

Obviously, I cannot provide a full accounting for the political mobility of Baptists and Congregationalists in this context. What I can do is suggest some additional mechanisms that would figure prominently in any such accounting. One is partisan realignment around new issues. Here, one naturally thinks of the role of temperance and especially of abolition in the rise of the Republican Party and its capture of Northern

evangelicals, but also of the role of social welfare and economic redistribution in the New Deal coalition and its capture of liberal Protestants. Another is the entry of new groups into the religious and cultural fields. Here, one thinks of the role of anti-Catholicism in unifying Northern Protestants after the Civil War, or of the way in which the rapid expansion of non-clerical and non-religious intellectuals (the scientific, managerial and professional elites) had on the theological dispositions of upper-crust Protestant clergymen in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, a development that was also driven by morphological changes within economic life (the progress of industrialization, the growth of public corporations, etc.). Chapter headings in the Baptist story might therefore include “abolition”, “Republicanism”, “the Fundamentals”, “Civil Rights.” Those for the Congregationalist story might include: “industrialization”, “the Social Gospel”, “liberal theology” and “the New Deal.”

Mather Meets the Market: From Moral Economy to Milton Friedman

In his bestselling book, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, progressive pundit Thomas Frank argues that the political allegiances of the Republican “base” are founded on a dubious *quid pro quo*: heartland proletarians renounce their material interests in good jobs, good wages, and social welfare; in exchange, politicians reward them with vicious attacks on “cultural elites” and high-sounding rhetoric on symbolic issues. In a phrase: “God, guns, and gays.” The only real beneficiary, Frank charges, is corporate capital. For the base not only loses its pocketbook, it loses its principles, too. What could

be more incongruous than Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" and Friedman's *Free to Choose*?

Compelling as it might seem to liberal secularists, Frank's account would be unconvincing to many conservative Protestants. For them, free markets are not at odds with Christian religion; indeed, they might argue that the two go hand-in-glove. And they would not be alone. Max Weber noted the historical affinity between the Protestant ethic and the utilitarian ethic over a century ago. And this affinity has not disappeared. Consider the following similarities between mainstream neo-liberal economics and contemporary evangelical theology: both emphasize the selfish instincts of natural man; both are suspicious of government; and both emphasize that an individual's ultimate fate is, and ought to be, the result of their own, personal choices. All that separates evangelicalism and utilitarianism, one might argue, is the matter of pleasure.

To assert that there are affinities between evangelicalism and neoliberalism is not to deny that there are tensions, of course. And in Colonial New England, it was the tensions that were emphasized. There, the ideal was not unfettered capitalism but the "godly commonwealth", a society in which church and state were jointly responsible for regulating economy and morality, and the untrammelled commercialism that prevailed in other parts of the New World was viewed with suspicion and even horror. The economic world envisioned by Cotton Mather and his ilk, was governed, not by the laws of supply and demand, but rather by norms of fair wages and just prices.

The real question, then, is not Frank's question -- why benighted heartlanders sacrificed their interests for their religion, but Weber's, namely, how and why evangelical thinkers reconciled their theology with the market.

Nationalism and Sectionalism: New England and the Old South Trade Places

Shortly after George W. Bush's victory in the 2004 Presidential Election, a remarkable map began to circulate through the internet. It depicted a new country, "BlueUSA," that would include the states of the Northeast, the Upper Midwest and the West Coast that had voted for John Kerry. For at least a few weeks, there was even some talk, however unserious, about "secession." [Hitt's NYT article] The irony was intentional and it was hard to miss. The new map of red and blue states was remarkably similar to the old map of Confederate and Union states, and the Republican party was once again under the spell of crusading evangelicals. Even the issues were similar; their spelling differed by only two letters: "abolition" vs. "abortion."

Nor were party affiliation and religious affinities the only things that had changed. The locations of "section" and "nation" were also reversed. The sectional South had become the heart of the heartland, the most nationalist part of the nation. Old New England, meanwhile, had gone from being the most unionist part of the Union, the most Protestant part of a Protestant nation, to being its most cosmopolitan and secular region.

What explains this remarkable role-reversal? To the extent they have addressed it at all – and they have mostly ignored it – social scientists have emphasized the conflicts of the Viet Nam era and the realignments of the Reagan era. [e.g., Gitlin] By this account, the conquest of the Democratic Party by cosmopolitan liberals – aka "McGovernite peaceniks" -- was the chief cause of the migration of working-class patriots – the famed "Reagan Democrats" – to the Republican Party.

While there is much truth to this explanation, it places too great an onus on the 1970s. It fails to explain how and when liberals (secular and Christian) became cosmopolitan. And more importantly, at least for us, it fails to explain how and when Southerners became patriots. It wasn't always so. While the South has long had a strong regional identity, this identity was originally sectionalist, rather than nationalist. This identity was rooted in a "religion of the Lost Cause", a Protestant-influenced civil religion with its own rituals and symbols, its own monuments and martyrs, a religion which was marked, moreover, by a deep ambivalence towards the Union.

Conservative Continuities: Religious Nationalism, Calvinist Moralism, Secular Umbrellas

So far, I have highlighted a series of discontinuities in the historical trajectory of conservative Protestantism, including: theological orientation, denominational composition, economic policy prescriptions and sectionalist/nationalist divisions. Naturally, there are continuities as well, some of which stretch back to the colonial era – and beyond.

One is Christian nationalism. By "Christian nationalism", I mean a blending of Christian and patriotic narratives and iconography which blurs or erases the line between religious and political community and identity. Sometimes, it takes a relatively diffuse form, as when Christian and American symbols (e.g., a cross and a flag) are juxtaposed with one another, establishing an implied equivalence (e.g., "good Christian" = "good American"). At other times, it takes a more explicit form, as in the common claim that

America has been chosen to play a leading role in the eschatological drama, that it has a special mission to spread Christianity and democracy to the rest of the world.

It has taken liberal scholars and commentators a long time to notice the prevalence of Christian nationalism among conservative Protestants. Perhaps that is why they often claim that it is new. They are mistaken. While Christian nationalism may have experienced a resurgence, this is certainly not an instance of emergence. Christian nationalism has been around for a very long time. In fact, it is as old as the Republic. And the notion that the American people are a “chosen people”, and the New World a “New Israel”, is already implicit in the language of the Mayflower Compact, which speaks of the Puritan emigration as an “errand in the wilderness” and famously urges the settlers to construct a “city on a hill.”

This is not to say that there have been no changes. The salience and content of Christian nationalism have varied over time. It has been more prominent in certain “times of trial”, such as the early decades of the Republic, the time of the Civil War, and the early decades of the Twentieth Century. And its content has evolved as well. For example, until recently, it was virulent anti-Catholic. That has changed in recent years, as conservative Protestants have joined forces with conservative Catholics in the battle against “secular humanists.” The claim that America is God’s new “chosen people” are also heard less frequently. Perhaps this is a concession to the sensitivities of conservative Jews. Nor has Christian nationalism always been the monopoly of conservatives. Until quite recently, it was also a staple of progressive rhetoric as well, as anyone who has read the speeches of Josiah Strong, William Jennings Bryan or, for that matter, Woodrow Wilson, well knows.

A second area of continuity is a strong emphasis on – indeed, an obsession with – sexual morality. There is nothing specifically American about this obsession, however much European and Europhile intellectuals like to believe that there is. But there is definitely something quite Calvinist about it. The difference was, of course, one of degree. Virtually all Christian communities have regulated sexuality to one degree or another, as, for that matter, have most non-Christian religions. Still, the Genevan Calvinists and their sectarian offspring were more concerned with disciplining sexuality than their confessional competitors, and that “Puritan” strain in conservative Protestant ethics has remained to this day.

Here, too, we find certain discontinuities within the overarching continuities. While opposition to abortion is not entirely new – some conservative Protestants began speaking out against it over a century ago – the level of agitation certainly is. Opposition to homosexuality, on the other hand, is very old indeed, but the focus on gay marriage, of course, is quite new. Another striking if subtle shift is the increasing centrality of sexual morality in Protestant jeremiads. The argument that the nation’s ills are divine punishment for the nation’s sins have long been a master trope in Christian homiletics. And “sexual license” has always had its place on lists of national sins. But rarely, if ever, have they been at the top of this list.

A third and final area of continuity that deserves emphasis is the role of secular umbrellas. Peter Berger famously argued that religion provides a “sacred canopy” that shelters a society from meaninglessness. Christian Smith later quipped that in modern America the sacred canopies has collapsed – and been refashioned into a multitude of sacred umbrellas, held aloft by smaller faith communities. What both fail to mention

American Protestants have used these same skills to build secular umbrellas as well – umbrella organizations that have enabled them to exert greater influence in the political process. While much has been said about the role which such organizations have played in the rise of the “new Christian right” – from the Moral Majority through the Christian Coalition to Focus on the Family – commentators have often failed to notice that the only thing that is new about these organizations is their name. From the missionary societies through the abolitionist crusade to the temperance movement, cross-denominational, single-purpose organizations have been a staple of Protestant politics in the United States – and not only there.

The Political Economy of the Sacred: Conservative Protestantism in Comparative Perspective

In the previous section, I analyzed conservative Protestantism from a historical perspective. I highlighted changes in the theologies, denominations, policy prescriptions, and regional alignments that have flowed through that place in religio-political space. I also noted some continuities as well. In this section, I will take a comparative perspective. I will ask why organized Christianity in general and conservative Protestantism in particular are so much stronger in the United States than they are in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany.

These countries provide appropriate and fruitful points of comparison, not only because they were so important to the settlement of North America, but also because their religious landscapes are quite similar to that of the United States in certain ways. Like

the US, all three of these countries had relatively high degrees of religious toleration and religious pluralism. Their populations included significant numbers of Catholics, Jews as well as various types of Protestantism.

These similarities are important, because religious toleration and pluralism are widely-held to be one of the key determinants of “religious vitality.” In the phenomenological version of secularization theory originally articulated by Peter Berger, for instance, the proliferation of competing creeds was believed to undermine the intellectual plausibility of religious belief as such. In this account, pluralism was the catalyst of secularism. In supply-side theory of religious change advanced by Rodney Stark, by contrast, religious competition is believed to stimulate religious vitality.

Unfortunately, neither of these theories has stood up to the evidence. The main “anomaly” confronting Berger’s approach is the United States, the most pluralistic country in the West, but also the most religious. One of the biggest anomalies confronting Stark’s approach is Catholicism. As a rule, Catholic countries and regions exhibit higher levels of church-going than Protestant ones.

Nor is this the only anomaly facing Stark’s “religious economies” approach. Until quite recently – perhaps as recently as the 1960s -- rates of church attendance and other indicators of religious involvement were still quite high in these countries, especially in the UK and the Netherlands – nearly as high as in the United States. In the late 19th century, they were virtually identical. What is more, religious pluralism was increasing during this period. **[fn on “religious regulation”]**

How might we account for these anomalies? Let us begin by considering the question of Catholic vitality. One answer, the best one in my view, is “culture” or, more

precisely, associational sub-culture. While the composition and situation of the Catholic population varied across the four countries under consideration, they were, on balance, a disadvantaged group. And one of the ways in which they responded to their oppression, was through the defense of regional autonomy and, later, the formation of urban sub-cultures. Interestingly, a similar dynamic can be observed in the predominantly Catholic countries of Europe as well, where church loyalists responded to secularizing campaigns of liberal regimes by forming a dense network of civic associations and establishing a new kind of political party: “Christian Democracy.” Perhaps the vitality of conservative Protestantism in the US could be understood in a similar fashion.

But what explains the recent collapse of organized Protestantism in other parts of the West? In approaching this question, it is important to note that the collapse has not been uniform. It was particularly precipitous for the national Protestant churches in Germany, the Netherlands and England (viz., the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican Churches). Smaller, sectarian groupings, by contrast, have been little affected, if at all. One reason for this may be that they were better equipped, both organizationally and ideologically, to adapt to the political and cultural disruptions of the 1960s and 1970s.

The foregoing reflections hardly constitute an adequate explanation for the divergent fates of Protestantism in the US and Europe. But they do suggest how we might go about constructing one. First, rather than linking religious vitality to cognitive coherence and plausibility, as Berger does, we might think of it in terms of organizational capacity and density. Second, rather than focusing exclusively on “religious competition” between churches or denominations, we might do better to think about how

such competition is related to other forms of competition, e.g., between classes, parties and even nations.

The approach I am suggesting here stakes out a *via media* of sorts between the “old paradigm” of secularization theory and the “new paradigm” or “religious economies model. Like the old paradigm, it situates religious transformation in the broader context of economic, social, political and cultural change. Unlike the old paradigm, however, it does not assume that the direction of change is a given, nor does it assume that the various spheres or fields of a society evolve according to the master narrative of modernization theory. In other words, it does not assume that religion is unable to adapt to “modernity”, i.e., to a pluralistic, democratic, industrial and urban social order. Rather, like the new paradigm, the approach developed here seeks to explain variations in “religious vitality”, and it sees competition and conflict as one of the key mechanisms that generates such changes. But unlike the new paradigm, it does not understand “vitality” or “competition” in narrowly religious terms, emphasizing the interaction between the religious “economy” and the economies of other fields as well. In other words, it assumes that the religious economy is a “political economy” that is influenced by a variety of and, more importantly, by interactions between such mechanisms.

Before exploring such interactions, we must first inventory the mechanisms. They can be broadly categorized as: demographic, economic, religious, sociological, political and geopolitical.

Demographics: Like a species, a religion must “reproduce” in order to survive.

Reproduction can be understood in both biological and religious terms. The un/successful reproduction of a religious community is influenced, not least, by its

aggregate rate of biological fertility. It is also influenced by “religious” fertility, meaning the relative rates of “birth” (new in-conversions) and “deaths” (apostasy or out-conversion.) One of the great advantages that conservative Protestants (and Roman Catholics) enjoy vis-à-vis their religious and secular competitors is higher rates of biological fertility, which are often (misleadingly) represented as the results of higher rates of religious fertility. Differential rates of fertility can have dramatic effects on the religio-cultural composition of a population – and that in the span of just a few generations.

Economics: Just as species-specific fertility rates can be influenced, both positively and negatively, by changes in the ecosystem, so, too, can religious demographics be affected by economic changes. Of particular importance in this context are the effects which industrialization and, later, de-industrialization, have had on levels of sub/urbanization, im/migration and geographical mobility as well as on residential and employment patterns. *Pace* secularization theory, the potential effects of such processes are not necessarily negative, where religion is concerned. Of course, they may in fact be negative in some instances, as when a family moves from a location where a certain religious “product” is available to one where it is not, and falls into apostasy as a result. But movement can have positive effects as well, if, say, a familiar religious product is available (e.g., because an appropriate church is closer by) or when a more suitable product is available (e.g., a denomination or congregation that better speaks to the family’s religious “needs.”) Whether the affects are negative or positive in the aggregate will depend on a variety of factors, including the relative range, quality, proximity and availability of religious products in the areas of out- and in-migration. Thus, one cannot

make predictions about the effects of economic transformations on religious reproduction without taking the structure of the religious economy, itself, into account.

Religion: The success or failure of a particular firm or of an entire national economy to adapt to market changes or market shocks depends upon a variety of factors including: un/successful changes in production and marketing, the relative strength of foreign competitors, state policies and so on. The success and failure of particular denominations or of entire religious economies can be analyzed in similar terms. Some denominations will be better able to penetrate a “new” market (e.g., a frontier, a slum, or an exurb) or adapt to changing “market conditions” (e.g., decreased social control, increased leisure time, the entry of new “firms” into the market). Adaptation is not a given, however, not only because some religious actors will pursue the wrong strategies, but also because the choice of strategies may be influenced by considerations other than efficiency, including organizational culture and vested interests. To understand the dynamics of the religious economy, then, one must look not only at market structure; one must also look at social structure.

Sociology: Too often, the social history of religion is reduced to the history of social class and religion, particularly in the work of European scholars. Of course, class can and does affect religious dispositions and denominational allegiances and the structure of the religious field is influenced by the structure of social class divisions, and it would be foolish to ignore these dynamics. Still, a comparative-historical sociology of religion worthy of that name must operate with a broader understanding of class, one that includes: a) specifically religious forms of class division, between religious elites and virtuosos, lay and elite, on the one hand, and religious masses on the other; and b) non-

economic forms of social stratification based on race, ethnicity, gender and region, among others. The crucial question is not “does class matter?” Rather, it is “How does class matter?” Of particular importance is which cleavages are activated and how they are, or are not, aligned with one another. A situation in which the dominant cleavage is “the working class” vs. “the church” is quite different from one in which “the common people”, including their clergymen, are arrayed against “the elite”, both social and clerical, and different again from a situation in which, say, ethnic, national and religious identities are intertwined in opposition to a “colonial” elite.

Politics: Obviously, the activation and alignment of social cleavages is not always the result of dynamics within civil society, by which I mean the realm of interaction outside of the market and the state. It is also often affected by partisan dynamics within political society, “party” being understood here in the broad sense in which Weber used it, to denote the action of organized groups seeking to capture the state or influence its policies. It should be emphasized that parties “represent” groups in two ways: first, in the sense of serving as an iconic or totemic representation of them, which makes them visible and therefore “real” to their members; and second, in the more usual sense that they try to “represent” or advance the symbolic and material interests of that group, to attain recognition and rewards for their constituents. Partisan contests are not simply struggles over material spoils, then; they are also struggles over who can legitimately be represented in the polity. In a word, over which groups shall exist politically.

Geopolitics: Of course, political struggles occur not just within nations, but between nations, and the latter struggles often affect the former. How geopolitical struggles affect political struggles depends crucially on how they are framed or, more precisely, on whose

frame becomes the dominant one. Of particular importance is how the external enemy and the stakes of the conflict are defined, for the definition of the external enemy often creates an internal class or party enemy at the same time, and the way in which the stakes are defined typically privilege one class or party as the true guardian of the nation. It is not uncommon for a religious class or party to be placed in the role of internal enemy and/or national guardian, and this can have a powerful de/legitimizing effect.

The above list does not constitute a theory of religious change in the sense of an explanatory account of the religious situation in the industrialized West. What it does provide is the raw materials, the conceptual building blocks out of which such an account can be constructed. I cannot and will not attempt a comprehensive account of “necessary and sufficient causes” for the outcome in question – the peculiar strength of conservative Protestantism in the United States. What I will do is enumerate a number of the causal mechanisms that I think were particularly important in generating this outcome. I should stress that the mechanisms in question are not the “micro-mechanisms” championed by rational-choice theorists, mechanisms comprised of the putative desires, beliefs and opportunities of individual actors; rather they are macro-level mechanisms of the sort invoked by comparative-historical sociologists, mechanisms composed, typically of collective actors, organizational resources and ideological systems.

I should also stress that the outcome in question was not a foregone conclusion by any means. The “initial conditions” in our four cases were remarkably similar in many ways. If we took a statistical snapshot of the US, Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands in, say, 1870 or so, we would find that all were characterized by relatively high degrees of: population growth, economic development, religious pluralism,

electoral competition, and Protestant nationalism, among other things. If a contemporary observer had attempted to forecast the future of conservative Protestantism in these countries, it is far from clear that the United States would have been ranked first. Great Britain was on the threshold of the Victorian era, perhaps the most culturally conservative and religiously vital period of its modern history. Germany was being “unified” around Protestant Prussia, rather than Catholic Austria, and Bismarck was constructing a political coalition dominated by militant Protestant nationalists united by a virulent anti-Catholicism. The situation of Protestantism in the Netherlands was rather different. There, Catholics were numerically dominant, and increasingly so. But Protestants were economically and culturally dominant, and reacted to the Catholic “threat” with the formation of Europe’s first conservative Protestant political party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party.

The differences among these cases were more differences of sequencing and degree rather than of genesis or kind. But differences of sequencing and degree can concatenate and cumulate in ways that eventually generate quite divergent trajectories, and that is what appears to have happened. In the remainder of this section, I will try to identify and describe some of the historical conjunctures and causal mechanisms that produced this long-term divergence.

1. The Church-State-Class-Party Dynamic. As we have seen, secularization theorists and religious economists have both placed considerable emphasis on the importance of religious pluralism. And, indeed, there does appear to be a connection between religious pluralism and religious vitality, if only within the Protestant countries of the North Atlantic world and at the national level. The limited geographical scope of

the pluralism effect, and the nation-level scale of its effects cannot be accounted for in terms of the phenomenological or market mechanisms postulated by the two theories.

While the pluralism debate identifies an important correlation, it does not appear to have identified the relevant mechanism. I would like to attempt a preliminary description of that mechanism here.

The hypothesized mechanism has four constituents: church, state, class and party. The effects of the mechanism will depend on the properties of, and relations between these constituents. Of particular importance are: 1) the degree of administrative and financial control which the state exercises over the church; 2) the degree of overlap between clerical and social elites; 3) the degree of overlap between confession and party; 4) the strength of “class parties”, i.e., parties based on economic class. Other things being equal, high and positive values on each of these relations will generate high degrees of “secularity” and low levels of religious “vitality”, i.e., widespread disaffection from organized Christianity. This is because a state church controlled by social elites will be perceived as a pillar of the “conservative order” and is less likely to sanction active outreach towards the lower classes, who are therefore more available for mobilization by class-based parties. The paradigmatic example of this dynamic is Sweden, now the most “secular” country in the Christian world. The United States, by contrast, has low or negative values on each of these relations, at least as compared with Sweden. As can be seen from Figure 1, this schema generates fairly accurate “predictions” of the outcomes observed in our three other cases, and in a number of other important cases, as well. What is more, it can also explain the geographical scope and sociological scale of the effects of religious pluralism. The reason that low levels of religious pluralism did not

lead to low levels of religious vitality in Catholic countries is that the Catholic clergy in general, and the parish clergy in particular, enjoyed a level of administrative and material autonomy from the state that was similar to that of the independent Protestant denominations, and this allowed them to engage in an active ministry to displaced and marginalized members of an increasingly urban and industrial society. In other words, religious pluralism was important only if, and only to the extent that, it resulted in clerical autonomy from the state and the dominant classes.

2. The Colonization-Industrialization-Urbanization-Evangelism Sequence.

While the Church-State-Class-Party Dynamic might be logically sufficient to explain the ordinal values of the national outcomes, it is not empirically sufficient to account for the numeric range of those outcomes, or for regional variations within them. A second mechanism, the Colonialism-Urbanization-Mission Sequence, generates greater explanatory power. As its moniker suggests, this mechanism emerges from the interaction of geopolitical, economic, demographic and religious. Of particular importance are: 1) The timing of colonial expansion vis-à-vis urbanization; 2) The timing of urbanization relative to industrialization; 3) the timing of industrialization relative to evangelism and 4) the numerical and financial strength of evangelically-oriented churches and clergy.

Why is this sequencing important? First, because colonies (and “frontiers”) were laboratories for the development of missionary expertise and organizations, which could redeployed to the metropole. Where colonization occurred late, by contrast, missionary capacities were relatively underdeveloped. Second, because the timing of industrialization impacted patterns of urbanization; as the scale of industrial production

increased so, too, did the scale of urban settlements. And larger settlements were more challenging targets for missionary work.. Third, because evangelism requires resources, and more resources are available in industrially advanced societies. And fourth, because churches and church leaders who saw evangelism as part of their identity, and therefore as a top priority, were more apt to use whatever resources they had for evangelization. Based on this model, we would expect that the reproduction of organized Christianity would suffer the greatest disruptions in a country which was late in establishing colonies and developing industries, and which did not have a large and well-funded evangelical sector in its religious economy. Conversely, we would expect the adaptation of organized Christianity to be most successful where, and to the degree that, the reverse was true.

3. The University-Hierocracy-Monopoly-Suppression Dynamic.

The two mechanisms discussed so far suggest why organized Protestantism may have fared better in some countries than in others. They do not explain the theological or political direction in which it evolved – broadly speaking: “liberal” or “conservative.” The theological evolution of organized Protestantism – as of doctrine more generally – is largely determined by the interests of, and conflicts within, the clerical elites. I propose that liberal theology was more likely to become the predominant orientation of clerical elites within a given country if, and to the degree that: 1) Clerical training occurred in universities, rather than seminaries. This is because clergy trained in university by university professors were more likely to be exposed to the sorts of historicist and naturalist critiques of revealed and supernatural theology to which liberal theology was an intellectual response. Clergy trained in cloistered seminaries, by contrast, will be less

exposed to such critiques and have fewer incentives, material and symbolic, to respond to them. 2) Clerical career paths were organized in a hierocratic fashion. The incentives for young and ambitious clergymen to accept theological orthodox, at least outwardly, will be greatest where there is a bureaucratic career ladder which rewards seniority and learnedness. It will be lowest where career advancement depends upon entrepreneurial activity, which rewards charisma and innovation. 3) There is a low degree of religious pluralism. The more religious life is dominated life by a single, large producer, the higher the rewards will be for serving that organization, and the greater the risks for joining one of its competitors. 4) The state actively polices theological dissent. This, too, will raise the costs of religious entrepreneurship by conservative theologians.

CONCLUSION:

The purpose of this essay has been to lay some groundwork for a comparative-historical analysis of conservative Protestantism in the contemporary United States. The first step in this process involved deconstructing and reconstructing the preconstructed and prejudicial foundations provided by conservative Protestants and their political enemies: respectively, the Covenant/Apostasy/Revival Trope and the Tradition/Modernity/Secularity Trope. Both are too politically interested and empirically challenged to serve as useful frameworks for historical analysis. What is needed, I have argued, is a conceptual framework that attends to continuity and discontinuity in the history of conservative Protestantism and give both religious and non-religious dynamics their due. To this end, I proposed that we think of “conservative Protestantism” as a

location within social space through which various religious, social and political groups and ideas flow. And I argued that the size and composition of this flow will be determined, not only by struggles within the religious field, but by the way in which those struggles intersect with dynamics in other fields.

As a second step towards comparative-historical analysis, I tried to identify some important continuities and discontinuities in conservative Protestantism. In doing so, I tried to especially highlight those dis/continuities that cannot easily be accommodated within the CART or the TMST. Because conservative Protestants wish to style themselves as the modern heirs of national tradition, I emphasized that: 1) today's orthodox-conservative theology (Arminianism) is yesterday's heterodox-liberal theology; 2) the core denomination in today's conservative Christian coalition (the Baptists) has its origins in an antinomian and sectarian movement; 3) The Conservative Protestants of Early America (the Congregationalist/Federalist establishment) were once rabid opponents of unfettered capitalism, and champions of a regulated economy; 4) The region of the US that is most identified with Protestant American nationalism today (the South) was, until fairly recently, the one most opposed to it. To say that the theological, denominational, political and regional composition of contemporary conservative Protestantism are historically and socially "constructed" is most emphatically not to say that they are wholly arbitrary or inconsistent. While there are undoubtedly tensions between conservative Protestant theology, neoliberal economics and a militant and militarist nationalism, there are deep affinities as well, between Arminianism, laissez-faire, and national chosenness, and liberal secularist critics who imagine otherwise are

deceiving themselves. Conservative Protestantism is not just an organizational or political construct. It is also an intellectual and ideological construct.

A proper understanding of conservative Protestantism requires comparative breadth as well as historical depth. Thus, the third and final step in my analysis was to juxtapose the American case with kindred cases in Western Europe. The starting point for this analysis, its central premise, is that the divergence between Europe and America is relatively recent. While conservative Protestantism is now much stronger in all regions of America than in almost any part of Europe (with the possible exception of Northern Ireland), this was not always so, and was probably not so to anything like the same degree as recently as the 1960s. Because most work on conservative Protestantism has focused on the post-1960s period, however, I chose to focus my attention mainly on an earlier period. My approach here could be broadly described as structuralist and conjuncturalist. It focused on the how processes of religio-cultural reproduction and religio-political alignment were influenced by the intersection of developments inside and outside the religious field.

The ideological effects of the CART and the TMST are visible not only in academic analysis but also, and perhaps even moreso, in political discourse. For however different their historical narratives of American history may be, the CART and TMST do share one fundamental assumption, viz., that conservative Protestantism conserves “tradition.” But does it? Is conservative Protestantism really “conservative”? And, if so, in what sense? There is no definitive, scientific answer to the first question, of course. Whether conservative Protestantism is “really” conservative is an issue for conservative intellectuals and pundits to debate. But it is possible to suggest how the conservatism of

contemporary conservative Protestants differs from other articulations of conservatism. We can thereby perform a kind of negative political theology in which we seek to disclose what conservative Protestantism is by noting the things that it is not. In that spirit, I would argue that most conservative Protestants do not: 1) defend inherited class privilege; 2) advocate authoritarian forms of government; 3) reject freedom of conscience. On the contrary, their religious forebears played no small role in establishing the relatively egalitarian, democracy and liberal socio-political order that prevails within the former domains of Western Christendom. Indeed, it could be argued – rightly, in my view – that this order would not exist without their contribution. What separates conservative Protestants from political liberals and even from certain conservatives is their understanding of what sustains this order. Generally speaking, conservative Protestants point to individual virtue and divine favor, while liberals, religious and secular, are more apt to emphasize institutional structures and human goodness. There are some deep and non-negotiable disagreements here, as regards the reality of divine Providence and the goodness of human nature. But there is also an area of rapprochement, which any good sociologist should immediately spot: the synergy between good institutions and human virtue, which are, after all, just two sides of the same coin. Whether the areas of disagreement or rapprochement become primary, however, is a question for political praxis, not sociological analysis.