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Exploring European Exceptionalism

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# Religious and Revival in Italy: Exploring European Exceptionalism

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## Abstract

The religious economy approach in the social scientific study of religion emphasizes the importance of supply-side factors in stimulating religious demand. Where many religious firms compete in a relatively unregulated market, levels of religious belief and participation will be far higher than in situations in which religious life is regulated by the state either in favor of a monopoly church or to constrain the market by subsidizing a state church and making it difficult for other religious groups to compete. Changes in the level of competition should thus be followed by changes in the level of popular religious commitment. This prediction is strongly supported when applied to recent religious trends in Italy.

Until very recently, the continuing vigor of religion in the United States was dismissed by advocates of the secularization thesis as “American exceptionalism.” Much was written to explain why the United States was failing to accompany the more “mature” and “sophisticated” European nations as they became fully modern, irreligious societies—the consensus being that there was something seriously defective about American culture (Berger 1969; Bruce 1989; Lechner 1991; Wallis 1986a, 1986b; Wilson 1982).<sup>1</sup> Even Iceland was said to have achieved an advanced state of secularization (Tomasson 1980), while the United States continued to display the religious vigor that was deemed appropriate only for backward nations.

However, as so often happens, history failed to cooperate. In recent years, modernization in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia has been accompanied by a remarkable intensification and spread of religion (Huntington 1996; Jenkins 2002). In light of these massive developments, it is Europe that now appears to be the exception in need of explanation (Woodhead, Martin, and Heelas 2001). As Peter Berger (1997: 974) put it:

I think what I and most sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It's very religious. So is the U.S. The one exception to this is Western Europe. One of the most interesting questions in the sociology of religion today is not, How do you explain fundamentalism in Iran? but, Why is Western Europe different?

This shift took the secularization faithful by surprise, leaving them with little to offer as an explanation of European exceptionalism other than to repeat their tired refrains about the incompatibility of religion and modernity. However, advocates of what often is called “the religious economy theory” (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark 1983, 1998; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1994) have said all along that the low levels of religion in Europe have nothing to do with modernity or the implausibility of faith. Rather, Europeans' apathy toward religious organizations is the expected result of highly

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Wilson (1982: 152) even made the incredible claim that among these defects was a lack of depth to American religion: “few observers doubt that the actual content of what goes on in the major churches in Britain is very much more ‘religious’ than what occurs in American churches.” Of course, Peter Berger (1969: 108) wrote much the same thing, suggesting that the churches in America “still occupy a more central symbolic position, but it may be argued that they have succeeded in keeping this position only by becoming highly secularized themselves ....” We suppose that if one mistook goings-on at the liberal seminaries and in denominations such as the United Church of Christ and the Episcopalians for the totality of American religion, one might reach such conclusions. Even so, one cannot imagine an American denomination that is less religious than the Church of England.

regulated and constrained religious markets that effectively prevent healthy competition: Protected and subsidized churches tend to be inefficient, with the result that general religiousness suffers (Chesnut 2003; Gill 1998; Greeley 1996; Hamberg and Pettersson 1994, 1997; Stark 1983, 1985, 2001; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Warner 1993, 1997). This is compatible with the fact that it is religious participation that is so low in Europe, while belief remains quite high (Winter and Short 1993). The disjuncture between belief and participation prompted Grace Davie (1990, 1994) to characterize Europeans as “believing non-belongers.”

But why are Europeans reluctant to express their religious beliefs in action? Proponents of the religious economy theory argue that it is because Europe’s dominant churches have long done little to attract people. Indeed, one area in which secularization clearly has made significant inroads into belief among Europeans has been the clergy who staff the protected monopoly firms, many of whom are not merely unable, but also unwilling to actively minister to the public. Virtual atheism is quite commonly and openly expressed by leading church figures in many European nations, especially in Protestant societies (Stark and Finke 2000). In contrast, when Americans confront denominations and church leaders of this sort (and they do), they have many attractive alternatives. So rather than ceasing to go to church, as so many Europeans have done, most Americans simply cease going to *those* churches and switch their affiliations elsewhere. The point is that people will switch, rather than quit, whenever churches *actively compete* for their support.

These principles are most readily applied within the context of a religious economy, which consists of all the religious activity that goes on in a society: a “market” of current and potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations (“firms”) seeking to attract or retain adherents, and the religious culture (“product”) offered by the organization(s) (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark 1983; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1994, 1996).

To sum up the relevant elements of the religious economy theory:

1. If government regulation of religious markets suppresses competition, the authorized religious groups will make little effort to attract rank-and-file support or to meet religious “demand.”
2. Moreover, the authorized churches will tend to be controlled and staffed by careerists, who are often quite lacking in religious motivation.
3. The net result will be widespread public religious alienation and apathy.
4. In addition, lacking effective religious socialization and congregational support, religious beliefs will become tentative, vague, and somewhat eclectic.
5. However, deregulation will (at least eventually) produce a religious revival. As religious organizations begin to compete for public support, participation in organized faiths will rise, and religious beliefs will become more clearly defined and widely held.

There is considerable evidence that this model fits recent religious developments in much of the world. The massive religious revival in Latin America began as Protestant faiths gained a sufficient foothold to challenge the negligent Catholic semimonopoly, thereby not merely converting millions to intense forms of Christianity, but eventually also stimulating vigorous Catholic responses (Chesnut 2003; Clarke 1999; Gill 1998). In Africa, literally thousands of indigenous Protestant sects now compete for members, not only with one another, but also with an aggressive Catholicism and, in many places, with militant Islamic groups (Gifford 1998; Jenkins 2002; Johnstone 1993). Indeed, the Islamic revival rests on serious (sometimes bloody) competition among its many sects and factions (Niandou-Souley and Alzouma 1996; Stark 2001; Stark and Finke 2000). Fenggang Yang (2003) has offered an interesting variant of the model in which there is no state-sponsored dominant or monopoly church clogging the market but *all* religious organizations are repressed. Here, the emphasis shifts to demand as a religious black market or gray market of firms arises and sustains intense commitment.

As for Europe, there have been several efforts to test the religious economy theory on Western Europe as a whole (Stark and Iannaccone 1994, 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). But the response by many Europeans, aside from hysterical proposals to drive a “stake through the vampire’s chest” (Bruce 1999: 2), has mainly involved a vigorous search for loopholes based on claims involving specific national exceptions to all general statements about European religion (Bruce 1995, 1999, 2000; Buckser 1996; Lechner 1996). This is an unproductive exchange. It would be far better to engage the secularization faithful on their chosen ground and to proceed nation by nation, examining the religious situation of each in social and historical detail. It was in this spirit that Eva Hamberg and Thorleif Pettersson (1994, 1997; Pettersson and Hamberg 1997) conducted a series of studies of Sweden that strongly supported the thesis that, even in this nation laboring under an openly irreligious and repressive state church, small variations in religious competition produce variations in religiousness. In similar fashion, Paul Froese and Steven Pfaff (2001) have completed a detailed study of East Germany, finding that its extremely low current level of religiousness was produced by an unusually intense government campaign on behalf of scientific atheism, combined with severe repression of the churches and the obvious and extensive complicity of the Lutheran state clergy in these and other aspects of state misconduct. The religious economy model has also received strong support not only from the occurrence of a religious revival in Hungary following the collapse of the repressive Communist regime, but also by correctly predicting the leveling off of that revival as a meddling state interfered with religious competition (Froese 2001). We are aware of several other case studies of this sort that are in preparation for other European nations.

Our case is Italy. Over the past few decades, many people have confidently included it among the European nations that are inevitably moving down the path to secularity. As late as 1993, Karel Dobbelaere (1993: 127) flatly asserted that the “end of religion [is] near” in Italy as in all of Europe, and the prominent Italian sociologist Sabino Acquaviva (1993: 55) seemed to welcome “the collapse of regular practice”

and “the growth of agnostics and atheists” (see also Acquaviva 1961, 1979). And despite withdrawing his support for the secularization thesis, Peter Berger (1999: 10) continues to postulate “a rapid decline in church-related religion” in Italy. But here, too, recent history has failed to conform to the theory. Instead, as we will show, the rapid development of a highly visible competitiveness in Italian religious economy and the rise of competition *within* Roman Catholicism have spurred a substantial religious revival: Church attendance has risen, and there has been a remarkable resurgence of Christian beliefs.

Aside from the national surveys of Italy done as part of the European Values Surveys, the data used in this essay were collected under the auspices of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) in Turin, some of which can be found in *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia (ERI)* (Introvigne et al. 2001). These data were not yet available when Italian sociologists Roberto Marchisio and Maurizio Pisati first applied the religious economy theory to Italy, but the new data confirm and greatly extend most of their findings (Marchisio and Pisati 1998; Marchisio 2000; Pisati 1998). So too with the study by Pino Lucà Trombetta (2002): Religious life in Italy is consistent with the religious economy theory. In addition, our analysis of the deregulation of the Italian religious economy removes a “problem” postulated by Luca Diotallevi (2001, 2002), namely, that Italy is “much too” religious to fit the religious economy theory. In addition, we fully agree with Diotallevi that because of competition among Catholic groups, both lay and religious, there usually is far more “pluralism” within Catholic “monopolies” than in countries where Protestant state churches prevail—as was noted in previous studies as well (Iannaccone 1991, 1992; Stark 2001; Stark and Finke 2000).

#### *REGULATING AND DEREGULATING THE ITALIAN RELIGIOUS ECONOMY*

For centuries, Roman Catholicism was the only licit religion in Italy. In 1880, when William F. Bainbridge,<sup>2</sup> a prominent American Baptist official, visited Rome, “the police detectives of Pius IX searched all our baggage to keep us from taking a [Protestant] Bible into the Holy City” (Bainbridge 1882: 247). Before 1947, religious liberty was not even affirmed in the Italian Constitution. Roman Catholicism was the state religion, and other religions were at best tolerated. It is true that Italian unity was achieved during the *Risorgimento*, under the monarchy of the House of Savoy, despite the opposition of the Catholic Church, and that following the Unification of 1861, an official climate of anticlericalism prevailed for several decades. Anticlerical governments occasionally supported Protestant churches, but these remained small and weak and did not achieve much success—in part because local authorities often remained strongly pro-Catholic and hostile to all minorities. After Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) seized power in 1922,

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<sup>2</sup> Great-grandfather of our colleague Williams Sims Bainbridge.

he soon found it convenient to sign a Concordat with the Holy See, granting a number of privileges to the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic parish priests from then on received their salaries from the state. Although Mussolini originally was a self-styled atheist and anticlerical, his regime ultimately compromised with the Catholic Church; religious minorities were subjected to gradual discrimination and occasionally persecuted (see Roachat 1990).

With the fall of the Fascist regime and the end of World War II, a new democratic Constitution was promulgated in 1947. It proclaimed all religions equal before the law (Section 8). It explicitly recognized the 1929 Concordat with the Catholic Church (Section 7), but it also called for other Concordats (known as *Intese*) to be concluded between the state and other religious bodies (Section 8.3). Politically, however, a party that enjoyed numerous ties with the Roman Catholic Church, the Christian Democratic Party, won the 1948 general elections and remained in power (alone or as the leading party of a coalition) uninterrupted until 1994. Several restrictions applicable to religious minorities remained in force, although a number of these laws were gradually declared to be incompatible with the Constitution by the newly established Constitutional Court. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Christian Democratic authorities remained openly hostile toward religious minorities, particularly in southern Italy, and the religious economy did not become truly deregulated (as the Constitution theoretically mandated). Starting in the late 1960s, however, the Catholic Church's own attitude toward religious minorities changed as a result of Vatican II. Slowly but surely, almost all laws limiting the activities of the religious minorities were amended or canceled.

In 1984 came truly dramatic changes. That year, the government was headed by Prime Minister Bettino Craxi (1924–2000), the leader of the Socialist Party (although the Christian Democrats remained the largest party in the coalition). Craxi negotiated a new agreement with the Catholic Church, changing several key provisions of the 1929 Concordat. Catholic parish priests no longer received a salary from the state. On the other hand, Italian taxpayers were henceforth required to pay a tax called *otto per mille* (meaning “0.8 percent”), corresponding to 0.8 percent of their total taxes, which was then channeled to “humanitarian or religious” activities. Unlike their German counterparts, Italian taxpayers cannot avoid the payment of this tax by declaring themselves agnostic. They are allowed, however, to “give” their *otto per mille* to the state, which is then empowered to use it for humanitarian or cultural projects (more recently, for the restoration of historical buildings or museums). Alternatively, taxpayers may ask the state to give the corresponding sum to a specified religious body. The necessity of offering an option to taxpayers determined the need to establish Concordats (*Intese*) with non-Catholic religious bodies. Although mentioned in Section 8.3 of the 1947 Constitution, no such additional Concordat had been concluded before 1984.

Also in 1984, a Concordat was established with the Waldensian Church (the oldest Protestant body in Italy, which also represented the Methodists following an agreement concluded in 1975). Later, other religious bodies entered into similar Concordats:

Seventh-day Adventists and Assemblies of God Pentecostals in 1988, the Union of Jewish Communities in 1989, and the Baptists and Lutherans in 1995. Further Concordats with the Italian Buddhist Union and the Jehovah's Witnesses were signed in 2000 by then-Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, but they have not yet been approved by the Parliament, which is required before official implementation. Under the *otto per mille* system, taxpayers are required to select either the state or one of the participating religious bodies (all Concordat partners except the Baptists, who have refused to participate in the religious tax system for theological reasons) by marking the appropriate selection on in their tax return forms. Again, unlike in Germany and other countries, those who fail to specify an option are not excused from payment of the tax. Nor does their tax go automatically to the state. It is, in fact, divided among participating religious bodies and the state, in proportion to the choices specified by those taxpayers who have duly indicated their chosen options.

The system is less complicated than it might seem. If a taxpayer indicates a preference for the Catholic Church, for instance (or the Lutheran Church or any one of the others), the state will transfer 0.8 percent of his or her taxes to the bank account of the preferred religious body. If the taxpayer fails to indicate any option, however, 0.8 percent of his or her taxes will be divided between the state and the participating religious bodies in proportion to the choices made by those who did indicate their preferred option. Because in 2001, for example, 83.4 percent of those who specified a clear option did so in favor of the Catholic Church, this meant that 83.4 percent of the 0.8 percent tax paid by every "no-choice" taxpayer also went to the Catholic Church. Because 13.42 percent of those who indicated an option chose the state, 13.42 percent of the 0.8 percent tax paid by the "no-choice" taxpayers also went to the state, and so on. In practice, however, both the system and the calculation are more complicated because two participating religious bodies (Assemblies of God Pentecostals and Seventh-Day Adventists) decided to accept only the money of the taxpayers who explicitly opted for them rather than taking a share of the taxes derived from the "no-choice" taxpayers. This will also be the position of the Jehovah's Witnesses, once their Concordat has been ratified by Parliament. Thus, although in 2001 (the most recent year for which full data are available), 61.1 percent of Italian taxpayers either forgot to indicate an option, did not understand how to proceed, or decided that they did not want to specify an option for whatever reason, this carried no detrimental consequences for the participating religious bodies, which eventually, together with the state, divided these tax payments among themselves.

The semi-deregulation of the Italian religious economy has been facilitated by the political demise of the Christian Democratic Party, a party with multiple ties to the Catholic Church. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of corruption scandals allowed the Italian judiciary (the most politically independent judiciary in Europe) to prosecute a number of prominent politicians, ultimately bringing about the end of the Christian Democratic Party. What was once the largest political party in Italy collapsed under the corruption scandals and divided itself into a number of small, newly



formed parties, none of which has been able to count itself among the main political players in any Italian general election from 1994 on.

### *RELIGIOUS COMPETITION*

In the past two decades, both immigration and deregulation have caused a dramatic increase in pluralism and hence in the level of religious competition in Italy.

In 1970, there were fewer than 5,000 Muslims in Italy, but by 2004, their number exceeded 750,000. At the beginning of 2004, foreign immigrants also included 350,000 Eastern Orthodox Christians (from the former Soviet bloc), 47,500 Buddhists, and 60,000 Hindus and Sikhs (Caritas and Fondazione Migrantes 2004). Immigration became a key item on every electoral and political agenda, and the perception of the Muslim community as “difficult to integrate” and as “a problem” was further exacerbated by the events of September 11, 2001. The effect of these immigrant faiths on competition has been very marginal, however, since each is so closely tied to ethnicity.

However, the semi-deregulation of the Italian religious economy also expanded pluralism and greatly increased the visibility of religious competition directed toward native-born Italians in several ways.

First, semi-deregulation had prompted the entry into Italy of an increasing number of Protestant organizations, most of them of the Evangelical and/or Pentecostal variety. Of the 120 such groups that currently hold services in Italy, fifty-seven have been founded or have arrived from abroad since 1984 (Introvigne et al. 2001). These figures do not include the so-called parachurches, that is, the independent missionary agencies that are not technically Protestant churches (such as Youth with a Mission and Campus Crusade for Christ). The *ERI* lists forty-eight such organizations, most of them introduced into Italy after 1984, that play an important part in Italian Evangelical Protestantism in general. In 2001, there were some 363,000 Protestants in Italy, 250,000 of them Pentecostal. Although the number is still small (0.63% of the total Italian population) compared to the number of active Roman Catholics (38%), the growth rate is impressive and, in some areas of southern Italy (such as around Naples area and in Sicily), may be compared to the success of these groups in much of Latin America (Chesnut 2003; Gill 1998; Martin 1990; Stoll 1990). This is entirely consistent with the proposition that when a religious economy becomes deregulated, aggressive new religious “firms” may enjoy very significant growth rates.

A second result of deregulation has been to modify the prevalence and significance of unconventional or “fringe” religions, sometimes called *new religious movements* (NRMs) or cults.<sup>3</sup> This too is as predicted by the religious economy theory, which

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<sup>3</sup> Used in the technical, nonpejorative sense of the word, a cult is a group outside of the conventional religious traditions of the society in question. Hence Christian groups are cults in India, and Hindu groups are cults in Italy.

postulates that fringe movements thrive where the conventional religious organizations are weak and, conversely, that it will be difficult to initiate and sustain unconventional movements to the degree that the religious economy is crowded with aggressive, conventional religious groups. Thus it follows that such groups will be far *more* prevalent in Europe than in the United States.

When Stark and Bainbridge (1980: 114) first put forth that proposition, they offered fragmentary data that seemed to support their claim, concluding that “Although it receives little attention from intellectuals and less coverage in the press, cult activity seems to be *quite widespread in Europe*.” This claim met with widespread derision, especially from Europe, where, as Thomas Robbins and James Beckford (1988: 19) pointed out, there was “a widespread but questionable assumption that [unconventional religious movements] are relatively rare and unusual phenomena.” In 1985, Stark followed up with far better data of much greater scope, all of which indicated that religious novelty was much higher in Europe. For example, when rates of Indian and Eastern cult centers were compared, the rate was 1.3 million for the United States and 1.8 for Western Europe. Once again, European scholars responded with contempt (Dobbelaere 1987; Wallis 1986a, 1986b).

Returning to the fray, in 1993, Stark claimed that, in fact, there were far more new religious movements of all sorts per million population in Europe than in the United States (Stark 1993). His data (based on preliminary surveys by J. Gordon Melton) indicated that the number of movements per million population was 3.4 in Europe (Western Europe plus Poland) compared to 1.7 in the United States. These marked differences are consistent not only with the theory, but also with the recent outbreaks of anticult fears and legislation in many European nations (Introvigne 1997; Richardson and Introvigne 2001). Regardless of what the secularization faithful might still choose to believe, today most European intellectuals and the press no longer pretend that “cults” are found only in “backward” America.

As far as Italy is concerned, in his 1993 article, Stark found evidence of sixty-six NRMs or cults. This number was based on the investigation carried out by Isotta Poggi, an associate of the American encyclopedist J. Gordon Melton, who spent one month in Italy in 1992, part of which was spent at the CESNUR office in Turin. At that time, work on the Italian encyclopedia (*ERI*) was still far from complete. That is no longer the case. On the basis of the criteria used in Stark’s 1993 article, according to the *ERI*, there were not sixty-six NRMs or cults in Italy in 2001 but 353. This figure does not include Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal movements independent of the mainline churches (another 120). Excluding these, the rate of movements per million population in Italy in the year 2001 is not 1.2 (the rate mentioned in Stark’s 1993 study) but 6.0, more than three times higher than the U.S. rate of 1.7.

However, as Italy develops a more crowded religious economy, and as the conventional religious bodies become more vigorous, less conventional groups should begin to find it more difficult to grow. Judging by the example of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, this already has begun. Before the start of deregulation and the consequent

rise in competition, the Witnesses enjoyed spectacular growth in Italy. As is shown in Table 1, between 1970 and 1980, the number of publishers (Witnesses who engage in about twenty hours of missionary activities each month) increased by 367 percent, and attendance at their Annual Memorial Service (the best estimate of total adherence) increased by 317 percent. Things slowed down considerably during the next decade as deregulation began to be felt: Publishers increased by 117 percent and Memorial attendance by only 88 percent. Then came a remarkable drop. From 1990 through 2000, publishers increased by only 27 percent and attendance by only 14 percent. These data come from official Witness publications, which have been found to be very trustworthy (Stark and Iannaccone 1997).

**Table 1: Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy, 1970–2000**

Year	Average Number of Publishers	Percent Increase	Annual Memorial Attendance	Percent Increase
1970	17,449	—	45,384	—
1980	81,569	367%	189,372	317%
1990	177,066	117%	355,816	88%
2000	225,748	27%	406,676	14%

Source: *Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Brooklyn, NY: WBTS, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001).

A third very significant aspect of religious competition in Italy has been the public impact of the assignment of the religious tax. No one involved in legislating the religious tax early in the 1980s could have imagined that as a result, religious groups in Italy would soon be engaged in an intense, very public, yearly competition to persuade taxpayers to give their taxes to one religious “firm” rather than another. But that is what happened. Every spring, when taxpayers file their returns, and are instructed to indicate their preference for one of the six participant religious “firms” (or the state or nothing), the image of the religious market suddenly comes alive in Italy. Participant religious bodies (with the exception of the rather quiet, and poor, Assemblies of God Pentecostals) hire leading advertising agencies in an effort to attract new taxpayers. Campaigns are aimed both at reminding church members that indicating their personal preference on the tax form is important and at capturing nonmembers. According to the European Values Survey, in 1999, 89 percent of the Italian population claimed to be “religious,” while only 40 percent were actually involved in a religious body with any regularity (Abbruzzese 2000: 422; Inglehart, Basañez, and Díez-Medrano 2004). Persuading those who “believe without belonging” to earmark their tax option for the benefit of a specific religious body is crucial in Italy. Slogans range from those that stress

the humanitarian (rather than, strictly speaking, religious) activities of the Roman Catholic Church to the well-known “I give my *otto per mille*’ to the Waldensian Church because I am not a Waldensian.”

The *otto per mille* tax system reminds Italians every year that there is a religious economy and creates, at the same time, both real competition and awareness of pluralism. In fact, Italians have responded to this annual campaign by contributing quite disproportionately to non-Catholic groups. Because the government is very slow to publish the results, the most recent complete data available are for 1997 (Fresco 2001). (The authors have examined official data through 2001, but these omit the number of individual taxpayers who use each option.) The 1997 data showed that although the Waldensian-Methodist Churches claim only about 25,000 members, 127,585 Italian taxpayers chose them to receive their *otto per mille*. Similarly, the Lutherans, with 8,000 members, were chosen by 36,811 taxpayers, while the Seventh-day Adventists and the Jews attracted twice as many taxpayers as they have members. In terms of percentages, the 2001 data showed very similar distributions. For example, of the nearly 40 percent of Italians who specified a religious groups to receive their *otto per mille* tax, 1.3 percent chose the Waldensian-Methodists. Surely, this bespeaks effective competition.

#### *THE ITALIAN RELIGIOUS REVIVAL*

If lazy monopoly churches are the cause of low rates of religiousness in Europe, then according to the religious economy theory, the transformation of the Italian religious economy should soon produce some degree of religious revival. And it has—in quite a dramatic fashion!

Table 2 is based on the World Values Surveys conducted in 1981, 1990, and 1999. As can be seen, religiousness in Italy rose very remarkably over this nineteen-year period. For example, belief in life after death went from a minority view (44 percent) to the view of a substantial majority (59 percent). Belief in hell also rose dramatically during this era. These findings not only are of considerable substantive significance, being based on large national samples, but also are highly statistically significant. In addition to these increases in commitments to basic Christian tenets, the proportion who pray has risen, as has church attendance, the latter from 32 percent who went weekly in 1981, before the onset of substantial deregulation, to 40 percent in 1999. This means that on a given Sunday in 1999, there were more than 4 million more Italians in church than in 1981. Finally, the proportion who responded that God was unimportant in their lives fell from 9 percent in 1981 to 8 percent in 1990 and down to 5 percent in 1999. If this is not a substantial religious revival, then that term has no plausible meaning.

**Table 2: The Italian Religious Revival, 1981–1999**

	<b>1981</b> ( <i>N</i> = 2,018)	<b>1990</b> ( <i>N</i> = 1,348)	<b>1999</b> ( <i>N</i> = 2,000)
Believes in a soul	71%	77%*	NA
Believes in life after death	44%	52%	59%*
Believes in sin	66%	72%*	NA
Believes in hell	33%	40%	49%*
Prays	71%	75%	79%*
Attends church weekly	32%	38%	40%*
God is unimportant in my life	9%	8%	5%*

\*  $p < .000$ .

Source: World Values Surveys and, for 1999, Abbruzzese (2000).

Table 3 is even more powerfully indicative of an Italian revival. Here, the data in each survey have been limited to young people, those in the 18- to 29-year-old age group. Belief in life after death shot up from 51 percent in this group in 1981 to 74 percent in 1999. The proportion who pray also rose. Church attendance increased quite substantially between 1981 and 1990 but appears to have fallen off a bit from 1990 to 1999. Finally, the proportion of younger people saying that God is unimportant in their lives decreased even more than was the case in the population in general.

**Table 3: Revival Among Young Italians (Age 18–29 Years)**

	<b>1981</b> ( <i>N</i> = 511)	<b>1990</b> ( <i>N</i> = 623)	<b>1999</b> ( <i>N</i> = 445)
Believes in a soul	63%	79%*	—
Believes in life after death	51%	68%	74%*
Believes in sin	53%	67%*	—
Believes in hell	22%	35%	45%*
Prays	63%	70%	71%*
Attends church weekly	22%	32%	28%*
God is unimportant in my life	19%	14%	8%*

\*  $p < .000$ .

Source: World Values Surveys and, for 1999, Abbruzzese (2000).

Proponents of the secularization theory have reacted by claiming that the various World Values Studies (WVS) data suffer from sampling problems and overreport religious attendance. However, research conducted by scholars who were not involved in the WVS, including some by its critics, moves in very much the same direction. In 1992, Roberto Cipriani, a senior Italian sociologist and hardly a champion of religious economy, published data from eighteen towns in central Sicily. The total of those who reported attending Mass “almost weekly,” “weekly,” or “more than weekly” amounted to 55 percent of his sample (Cipriani 1992: 146). While central Sicily is mostly rural, Carmelina Chiara Canta, a sociologist with the University of Rome, published research on Sicily as a whole in 1995, with a sample that took into account large cities such as Palermo and Catania. Canta reported that 42 percent in Sicily went to Mass “two or three times per month,” “weekly,” or “more than weekly,” and the figure was 41 percent for Palermo, which is commonly referred to as a very secularized city (Canta 1995: 126–127). In 1997, Berzano and Introvigne published research on a large sample from the province of Foggia, in Puglia. The area is admittedly more religious than the national average, but the sum of those attending Mass “weekly” and “more than weekly” was 51 percent (Berzano and Introvigne 1997: 276). Finally, in 2003, research was published, part of an international project, whose authors read like a who’s who of those who had criticized the WVS data, most of them staunch critics of the religious economy theory. According to their data, taken from a national sample, those who attend Mass “at least once a month” (note the “at least”), “once a week,” “more than once a week,” and/or “daily” amount to 50 percent of the Italian population and 47 percent of the younger cohort of the sample, including interviewees born between 1975 and 1981 (De Sandre 2003: 125). Although differences in sampling and outcome obviously exist, these data are not very far from those of the WVS, particularly when one considers that the questions here referred only to Catholic Mass, thus excluding from the count the members of the small but existing religious minorities in Italy.

On the other hand, most of the revival is among Catholics, since Italy has become even more Catholic than it was before deregulation. That is, the Catholic Church has been so greatly invigorated by Protestant competition that the proportion who reported themselves to be “active” Catholics rose from 33 percent in 1981 to 35 percent in 1990 and on to 38 percent in 1999 (Abbruzzese 2000: 397–455). This Catholic revival seems to have become even more apparent in the wake of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Even very secular journalists and intellectuals make increasing mentions of Italy’s “Catholic heritage” in the face of a perceived “non-Western” (i.e., Islamic) challenge, and some bishops have been happy to report that Catholic church attendance appeared to rise after September 11, 2001. A possible, and less welcome, additional consequence of September 11 is an increase in Catholic hostility to newly established minorities. Unlike other European countries, Italy has no significant secular anticult movement, and Catholic countercult groups, although vocal, were not strongly supported by the bishops, who did not want to be accused of being intolerant, of protecting a quasi-monopoly, or of “rocking the boat” that granted

significant advantages to a number of different religions after the 1984 reform (see Introvigne 2001).

It also should be acknowledged that in Italy, and perhaps in most Catholic nations of Europe, the Roman Catholic Church was not as disabled by being a monopoly faith as has been true for Protestant state churches (Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). For one thing, the Catholic Church has never been subject to the sort of state control, including state intrusions into doctrinal questions, that has often occurred in Protestant nations (Gustafsson 1990). For another, the Catholic Church has benefited from quite high levels of internal competition to offset the lack of external competitors, as has been demonstrated by Luca Diotallevi (2002). The most effective of these intra-Church competitors—the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Opus Dei, and Comunione e Liberazione—also have offered quite high intensity faith. Each of these groups has been growing in recent decades, while the more liberal sectors of the Church have declined somewhat. Specifically, 10 percent of Italian Catholics tell pollsters that they belong to a Catholic movement. According to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, about 250,000 Italians actively participate in the group, and several million more maintain some degree of connection to the movement (Pesare 2000).

### CONCLUSION

In an essay comparing the religiousness of Germans and German-Americans, Stark concluded that “faced with an American style [highly competitive] religious economy, Europeans would respond in the same way as did their American cousins” (1997: 187). The data presented in this article seem to confirm that conclusion insofar as Italians are concerned. What is, by comparison with the United States, a quite limited deregulation and the advent of rather modest levels of competition have been sufficient to produce an approximation of American levels of religious belief and practice—which suggests that much of the American pluralism is redundant vis-à-vis activating popular responses (Stark and Finke 2003). The long-term durability of the Italian revival seems guaranteed by the fact that it has had the greatest impact on the younger generation. This is not a case of elderly Catholics suddenly returning to the piety of their youth, but of youth displaying levels of piety above those of previous recent generations.

The implications of these findings for the secularization thesis are devastating. That thesis is, after all, a theory that is compatible with only one trend: religious decline. It is challenged even by a substantial period of religious stability; it is refuted by any meaningful signs of increasing religiousness. In contrast, the religious economy theory not only can explain religious revivals and stability, but also has successfully predicted the recent religious declines in Poland, Quebec, the Netherlands, and Hungary (Froese 2001; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1996).

When Peter Berger gracefully retracted his support for the secularization thesis, he might also have noted that it is not merely that most of the world *remains* quite religious.

Instead, he might have pointed out that much of the world—including the Islamic countries, Latin America, Africa, and China—has *become* significantly *more* religious than it was even thirty years ago. These developments place European exceptionalism in the proper perspective. As long as their religious markets are highly regulated, the apparent secularization of many European nations will be sustained. But should significant and authentic competition arise, it seems likely that other Europeans will embrace religion just as the Italians are doing.

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