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Relics of the Secular

Beam me up, Jesus
bumper sticker, Chicago, 2006

I accepted the invitation to speak and to write on the topic of religion in the U.S. on the condition that I could focus on its representation and theorization (not on its practice) at the turn of the nineteenth century. I will end up doing just that. But I find it impossible not to begin with the turn of the twentieth century – that is, with our present: with the present reappearance (or perhaps just the persistence) of the struggle between religion and science, between the sacred and the secular, between an epistemology based on faith and an epistemology based on reason. Of the *many* recent episodes in this struggle – the anti-abortion "Right to Life" protests; battles over school prayer; the effort of the executive branch of the U.S. government to intervene in the Terri Schiavo case – I want to single out the recent (and current) effort to promote some alternative to Darwin's account of evolution within the scientific textbooks being used in public schools. By epistemology, then, I mean something simple, something practical: I want to know what modes of knowing are to be legitimized as knowledge within the science classroom? As a recent issue of *Time* magazine makes clear – with its cover and cover story theatrically pitting *God vs. Science* – this question has lost none of its urgency.[1] This November, at a conference entitled "Beyond Belief: Science,

Religion, Reason and Survival" (held at the Salk Institute, in La Jolla, California), well-known scientific figures argued over strategies for waging the war they seem to be losing. Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist from Oxford, expressed particular frustration: "I am utterly fed up with the respect that we – all of us, including the secular among us – are brainwashed into bestowing on religion."[2]

This past April (2006), the Governor of Mississippi signed into law a House Bill that stipulates (section 3) that "No local school board, school superintendent or school principal shall prohibit a public school classroom teacher from discussing and answering questions from individual students on the origin of life." As more than one commentator has reflected (decoding the law and recognizing its history), "this section of the bill is intended to allow or encourage anti-evolution teaching in science classes." The original version of the bill had read: "No local school board, school superintendent or school principal shall prohibit a public school classroom teacher from discussing and answering questions from individual students on the issue of flaws or problems which may exist in Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the existence of other theories of evolution, including, but not limited to, the Intelligent Design explanation of the origin of life." [3] Revised *almost* beyond recognition, the bill nonetheless carries, for the Mississippi constituency, much of its original force. Discussing questions about the "origin of life" amounts to establishing a pluralistic environment for settling – or leaving unsettled – various questions that science poses.

Despite the National Council on Science Education's adamant stance against the legislative micromanagement of the topic of evolution in science classrooms, it has become a hot topic indeed in several states, where Darwin has been losing ground against the rival theory of "Intelligent Design" – the updated, recoded ideology of Creationism. This past spring, the decision in the *Selman et al. v Cobb County School District* came under appeal in Cobb County, Georgia; this is an effort to overturn a ruling that

prohibited the addition of stickers to science textbooks that caution students to recognize evolution as "a theory, not a fact." In 2002, the local school board voted to make such stickers requisite on biology texts; warnings were then affixed to more than 30,000 books; a group of parents filed suit against the board, and the federal district court ruled (in 2005) that the disclaimer was unconstitutional; and yet, the battle goes on.[4] In his original account of the policy of "balanced education" which the school board adopted in 2002, Art Toalston reported (for the *Baptist Press*) that the action "refused to buckle to pro-Darwinian scientists"; the chairman of the school board, Curt Johnson, defended the use of the stickers by arguing that we "expect our science instruction to be broad-based, factual and respectful of all views." In other words – and very explicit words – by asking science to be "factual" yet "respectful of all views," he is asking *science* to become pluralistic: to do without the distinction between the scientific and the unscientific. As with the Mississippi bill, the basic move is to invalidate the grounds on which science is recognizable as science, the means by which science as such makes sense.[5]

In light of this bill and this ruling, it should come as no surprise that legislative efforts to preserve the epistemological clarity of science have not fared well. In Wisconsin this past May, a bill aimed against the teaching of "Intelligent Design" was meant to "ensure that any material presented as science within the school curriculum ... [be] testable as a scientific hypothesis," describing "only natural processes," and remaining "consistent with any description or definition of science adopted by the National Academy of Sciences." The bill died before reaching the State Assembly. [6] Creationism – with which one associates William Jennings Bryan's defense of the Bible in the trial of John Scopes in 1925, his support of the state law that prohibited the teaching of "any theory that denies the story of divine creation as taught by the Bible" – is suddenly alive and well in 2006. Traditionally, the Scopes trial, despite Bryan's victory, redefined U.S. culture as

a secular culture, legitimizing "the exile of the Fundamentalists," a term invented by the Reverend Curtis Lee five years before.[7] As Susan Harding has put it, the trial had the "narrative effect" of producing closure, the "end" of the Fundamentalist movement; it had the "narrative effect" of producing a point of origin: the beginning of a genuinely modern, genuinely secular state (70-75). That is to say that the Scopes trial has been read (all too conveniently) as a crucial twentieth-century chapter in a long history of secularization in the West wherein religion becomes increasingly personal and private.

Of course, along with other historians and anthropologists, Harding acknowledges that, however submerged it might have been, "strict Bible belief in America did not diminish but rather flourished during the middle half of the twentieth century" (75). As a contemporary American movement, Creationism coalesced in the 1960s – as a response, one might speculate, to the federal government's obsession with science education, part of its effort to fight the Cold War, its effort to respond to Sputnik's success, and its recognition that Word War II had been won by scientists. The national and *nationalist* fixation on science could hardly help but provoke local, regional counter-fixations meant to preserve the priority of faith in this new age of reason. The *Creation Research Society Quarterly* began publication in 1964, and it continues to thrive. By now there are Creationist books and journals and websites all sharing the conviction that "many observed properties of the world cannot adequately be explained by evolutionary or uniformitarian models," and that "things can be explained better by the sudden creation of the world in the not so distant past." As one article explains, "the second step has properly shied away from the response 'that is the way God did it,' in favor of the design and order that a benevolent Creator has ordained." Nonetheless, the same article goes on to argue that "the goal of all of this effort has been to produce a consistent and detailed alternate model that is Biblically correct and adequately describes what we observe" (Faulkner and DeYoung). This is just

a small part in the resurgence of Christian fundamentalism, which began to gain such public headway in the 1980s. By now, this resurgence makes U.S. culture appear as a mirror image of those cultures captivated by a resurgent Islam. *On the one hand*, the Iranian revolution of 1979, the expulsion of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the break up of the Soviet Union itself – these each in their way contributed to the conviction that states can be Islamicized, that the nineteenth and twentieth century history of the Middle East's apparent secularization can be undone, and that history can be understood as something other than the globalization of the Western order. *On the other hand*, within the "Western order" secularism has been unraveling, nowhere more dramatically than in a White House beholden to the moral minority.

This is one reason why, I think, American scholars face such a challenging conundrum today. Historians and anthropologists have done a profoundly persuasive job of showing the West how provincial it has been when, addressing Islam, it deploys the religious/secular opposition. As Talal Asad argues, in *Genealogies of Religion*, there cannot be a transhistorical definition of religion – some universal account of religion as a kind of autonomous essence – because such a definition is itself the product of historical circumstances. "The separation of religion from power," he argues, "is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history," and the product, further, of "the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible in belief statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time. This construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is inessential to our common politics, economy, science, and morality"(207). But however persuaded I may be by this argument (and persuaded by other scholars, like Saba Mahmood, who show how liberal cultural analysts, for instance, have utterly misconstrued Islamic piety and specifically Middle-Eastern modes of living one's faith), I nonetheless find myself unable *not* to

resort to the most "commonsensical" religious/secular binary when confronted with the idea of teaching Intelligent Design in the Mississippi public schools. "Secularism," in this instance, simply means granting a nonreligious mode of knowing (called "science") the right to define itself, to assume a kind of epistemological jurisdiction where particular questions can only be answered in particular ways. In other words, one is left with a curious new double standard: a willingness to recognize the importance and the value of the utter imbrication of what we call the sacred and the secular within the Islamist movements of the Middle East (and thus a willingness to avoid thinking of religion as some kind of discrete essence), but an unwillingness to tolerate such imbrication within the U.S. – or, more specifically, within public educational institutions of the U.S. Alternatively, more and more humanist scholars within the U.S. are now willing to trumpet the important work that religion has accomplished in the U.S. (on behalf of abolition in the 1850s, on behalf of the poor, on behalf of civil rights in the 1950s, &c.) without ever facing, for instance, the question of whether they think public schools should be teaching Intelligent Design in the science classroom, the question of whether or not to grant science the disciplinary authority to exclude what it does not recognize as science. This new naivety complaisantly succeeds by never challenging itself to confront concerns that are continuing to be settled (or unsettled) by law.

At the very least, though, arguments such as Asad's, and U.S. movements such as Creationism, expose the limits of one kind of reasoning, which can be illustrated by Slavoj Zizek. Among the commentators unwilling to grant the religious and theological dimensions of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Zizek launched an especially unequivocating case. "Pseudo-naturalized ethnico-religious conflicts are the form of struggle which fits global capitalism," he argued, because in our "post-political" era "politics proper" has been replaced by "expert social administration." The point is not to dismiss religion as an opiate

but to expose and to legitimate proper politics, "the true choice ... between capitalism and its Other" (54). Eager as he is to defend the record of Islam (the history of which exhibits far more tolerance than Christianity), he means, above all, to eschew any clash-of-civilizations rhetoric, and to read 9/11 as "the outcome of modern sociopolitical conditions" (40). Indeed, he advocates some healthy "economic reductionism," a focus on "the clash of *economic* interests" that allows us to see that the "rise of the Taliban, this apparent 'regression' into ultra-fundamentalism, far from expressing some deep 'traditionalist' tendency, was the result of the country being caught up in the whirlpool of international politics – it was not only a defensive reaction to it, it emerged directly as a result of the support of foreign powers (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the USA itself)" (42-43).

Despite the validity and importance of this history (the story of the entanglement of U.S. interests with the Taliban), the idea that religion serves only as a means (not as an end) and the idea that tradition is beside the point provoke several problems. To begin with, Zizek falls within the familiar frame of representing the Orient because it cannot accurately represent itself.[8] And when he turns his attention to the work of the "Right Christian fundamentalists" (Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson's efforts to rewrite 9/11 as the story of divine punishment for American sin), he offers no comparably reductionist account, as though in this case fundamentalism must be accepted as mere fundamentalism. Moreover, Zizek can never admit that an antipathy to modernization (secularization, crass materialism, sexual license, science &c.) may not be translatable into antipathy to capital, although the history of U.S. fundamentalism and of conservative monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait), would seem to make it clear that traditionalism, rather than perpetually being a displaced anticapitalist motive, sometimes serves on behalf of tradition. My simple point, amid Zizek's multi-faceted and often compelling arguments, is that however tempting it is to depict (that is, to translate) the religiosity of resistance, insurgence, and attack as the

sacralization of proper (economic) politics, that depiction cannot escape from becoming a parochial account that depends on an *apriori* distinction between religion and politics and the separation of church and state.[9]

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Although I meant to bring up a handful of recent Creationist cases as a way of dramatizing the fundamentalist and evangelical present within the U.S., I've drifted somewhat, to make the following points. First, that "the future of an illusion," as Freud put it, has become, contrary to his faith in the "inevitable transition" from the religious to the scientific spirit, a robust future indeed (Freud 38). Those confident declarations about the waning role of religion in the modern world – the secularization thesis advanced at the turn of the nineteenth century by Weber and Durkheim and Freud, among others – have been displaced, at the turn of the twentieth century – by no less confident declarations that religion has re-captivated the human imagination. By now, a world fully modernized and rationalized seems to be a world that nonetheless remains "enchanted." Those of us who have been in the comfortable habit of ignoring religion both in the practice of our daily lives and as an object of analysis now find that habit rudely interrupted. Which is why, though I am neither a scholar of religion in the United States, nor a practicing analyst of contemporary culture in the U.S. or elsewhere, I have found myself, almost despite myself, engaged by the historical and the contemporary distinction between the sacred and the secular. Second, that our efforts to apprehend this newly enchanted world seem complicated by a willingness to respect, outside the West, the integral part that religion plays in all aspects of life, but no such willingness to respect such phenomenon within the U.S., or, even worse, a sudden willingness to respect religion in the U.S. without addressing those aspects of life (e.g., public education) where religious

thinking poses a particular problem. And third, that efforts to translate "fundamentalism" and "fanaticism" into the pursuit of economic politics by other means – efforts to read the sacred as the secular, or as a simple displacement of a secular agenda – seem confused and unconvincing.

Let me now focus on the period of American history I know best, the turn of the nineteenth century, to juxtapose two events: the triumphant popularity of the social gospel novel in the 1890s, foremost the popularity of Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1897), a novel that remains in print and remains popular today; and William James's engagement with the question of religion in the best-selling *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and in *The Will to Believe* (1897). The juxtaposition is meant to respond to a question I posed in a recent essay, the question of what "we" (we cultural and literary critics?) understand religiosity to be.[10] In the context of the legislative cases with which I began, this pairing from the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century provides a way of introducing a distinction – between the private and the public – that seems especially salient when we're addressing religion and secularism in the U.S. My overarching argument will be that Sheldon secularizes faith by transcribing a human Jesus into the model for life in the modern world, whereas James preserves a distinct, extra-secular domain for what he calls the "reality of religion." My further point will be that Sheldon's work, which one can align with several aspects of evangelism, squares with the notion of America as the home of "civil religion," whereas James produces a monumental psychology of the essentially and exquisitely private experience imagined by Jefferson in his "Wall of Separation" correspondence. James provides a signal example of the post-enlightenment "privatized Christian" treatment of religion that emphasizes, in Asad's words, "the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world" (47).[11] Uncomfortable as one might be with James's treatment of religion, I consider it the prerequisite for the capacity of the scientific public sphere to exclude religion as a

"constituting activity" in the world this public sphere means to delimit. Of course, it would make no sense to call either James or Sheldon a secularist: they both write passionately on behalf of religion. But whereas for James religion remains private, for Sheldon the religious responsibility is to enact one's faith continuously, both privately and publicly.

The 1890s was a decade that witnessed a rather remarkable output of narrative prose fiction: Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (among other novels), Twain's *Puddin'head Wilson*, Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman*, Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*, Kate Chopin's *Awakening*, Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. But no novel of the decade was as popular as Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1897). Born in the Dakota Territories in 1856, Sheldon went to College at Brown; then, after his seminary education, he became the pastor of the Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas, proclaiming that he would preach "a Christ for the common people. A Christ who belongs to the rich and poor, the ignorant and learned, the old and young, the good and the bad ... a Christ who bids us all recognize the Brotherhood of the race, who bids throw open this room to all." Eager to discover more about the "other half," Sheldon disguised himself as a tramp looking for work, finally finding employment shoveling snow from the train tracks. He then spent a week with laborers and professionals, "living as nearly as I could the life they lived, asking them questions about their work, and preaching the gospel to them in whatever way might seem most expedient." He integrated himself into the lives of lawyers, rail workers, students, doctors, and reporters, and he finally found a way of deploying this integration within his church, where attendance had been waning. He began to write and to read what he called "sermon stories," the first chapter delivered to the congregation on October 4, 1896. In 1897 he published the novel that became an instant best-seller.[12]

It is the story of a small town preacher, Reverend Henry Maxwell, who makes no time for a tramp as he busily completes

his Sunday sermon, only to have the sermon close with the reappearance of the tramp in church, who makes a speech to the congregation:

> "I lost my job ten months ago. I am a printer by trade. The new linotype machines are beautiful specimens of invention, but I know six men who have killed themselves inside the year just on account of those machines... . I've tramped all over the country trying to find something. There are a good many others like me... . I was wondering as I sat there under the gallery, if what you call following Jesus is the same thing as what He taught. What did He mean when He said: 'Follow me?'" (15)

"What do you Christians mean by 'following the steps of Jesus,'" the tramp continues, and then goes on to explain that he has had not one word of sympathy from anyone in the town. His wife has died four months ago in a New York tenement, and his daughter has had to go and live with another family. He talks about the people who go to the big churches and have good clothes and houses, and the people outside the churches who walk the streets looking for jobs. "I suppose I don't understand," he says, "is this what you mean by following in His steps?" (17) When he finishes speaking, he lurches toward the communion table and then collapses in a heap. The event creates a "great sensation in First Church parish," the tramp dies, and the Reverend pledges his loyal followers "to do everything in our daily lives" for one year "after asking the question 'What would Jesus do?' regardless of what the result may be to us" (19-26). "How am I to tell what He would do," one parishioner asks, and the answer is that there is no sure way to tell, "except as we know Jesus through the medium of the Holy Spirit" (26).

The novel – which is not short at 300 pages – becomes a kind of exercise, where, in one chapter after the other, an individual asks the question, "What Would Jesus Do?", and thus utterly

alters her or his behavior. The editor of the *Daily News* decides against publishing a story about the prizefight, and against publishing advertisements for choice liquors and cigars, and against publishing a Sunday edition altogether: "I am convinced that from a Christian point of view, our Sunday morning paper has done more harm than good," the editor explains to a disbelieving colleague; "I do not believe that Jesus would be responsible for it if He were in my place today" (45). For other members of the congregation – an heiress, a businessman, a college president – that transformation is no less profound. Together they organize "the Christian forces of [the town of] Raymond for the battle against rum and corruption" (118). Meanwhile, Reverend Maxwell extends his simple message elsewhere, notably Chicago: "Would the movement begun in Raymond actually spread over the country? He had come to Chicago with his friends partly to see if the answer to that question would be found in the heart of the great city life" (277).

The "standard of conduct" meant to "revolutionize the world" (280) was meant, first off, to revolutionize the church, to turn the church's mission into a mission for social justice. Over and against the assumption "that the church contains, for the most part, men and women who think more of their own ease and luxury than of the sufferings and needs and sins of humanity," Revered Maxwell wonders whether the wealthy are ready to use their wealth "as Jesus would," and whether the talented are ready "to consecrate that talent to humanity, as Jesus undoubtedly would do?" (293) Although, on the one hand, the patent project consists of turning faith into practice, it remains important to recognize, on the other hand, how the novel (in Asad's terms) promotes religion as "a constituting activity in the world," rendering religion *essential* to "politics, economy, science, and morality." Sheldon's profound simplification of faith is a no less profound extension of it.

This novel has enjoyed incomparable success: it has sold over 30 million copies since its first publication; it has been widely

translated; it is the subject of extensive commentary, the source of the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) movement, and, by now, the inspiration for several websites. How do we understand the appeal of this text? There are many ways of trying to explain its success in America, not least its untheological, almost antitheological focus of quotidian practice in the world. As Alan Wolfe has shown, the evangelical success in the U.S. derives from its "lack of interest in dogma and doctrine," for in the U.S. "whatever the Lord requires, knowledge of his teachings is not among them" (71, 247). Contrasting Sheldon to William James, I want to point out the emphasis on behavior, and what you might call a secularist vision of Christianity that emphasizes not Christ's role as a savior, but Jesus' life as a man, and that *integrates* that life within the daily lives of Americans. Religious life exists as the life of the editor refusing to print news of the prize fight, a life that involves changing the lives of others, a life in public meant to change the public sphere and the public as such.

When James published *The Will to Believe* in 1897, he recognized that this collection of addresses had a very specific audience in mind. Concerned to defend the "legitimacy of religious faith," he recognized that many of his readers considered "mankind ... only too prone to follow faith unreasonably"; he agreed that "mankind at large most lacks in criticism and caution, not faith," and admitted that, were he addressing the Salvation Army, for instance, such an audience "most need[s]" its faith "broken up and ventilated," with the "northwest wind of science" blowing "their sickliness and barbarism away" (x). But he was writing for "academic audiences" suffering from a "paralysis of their native capacity for faith"; he was not "preaching reckless faith" but "the right of the individual to indulge his personal faith at his personal risk" (x-xi). James also argues that various faiths "ought to live in publicity, vying with each other," and that the scientist "has nothing to fear from his own interests," given that, in accord with the law of the "survival of the fittest," those faiths will survive that "adopt also [the scientist's] hypotheses, and make them

integral elements of their own" (xii).[13] The Darwinian argument here prompts James to replicate Freud's mistake, and not to anticipate the ways in which the faithful (refusing, let us say, to comply with Darwinian law) would demand that the scientist adopt a religious hypothesis.

But my point here is to note that James didn't deny the interest of religious competition in public even though his chief concern was private faith. By the time he published *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902, he decided to "confine himself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple," defining religion as such as an utterly and intensely private phenomenon: "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (35, 36). Already, then, the discrepancy between James and Sheldon is clear. Sheldon's novel does conclude with the Reverend Maxwell's visionary experience: "And the figure of Jesus grew more and more splendid. He stood at the end of a long flight of steps. Yes! Yes! O my master, has not the time come for this dawn of the millennium of Christian history?… He rose at last with the awe of one who has looked at heavenly things..." (301-02). Indeed, Sheldon might be said to record the kind of "deliverance" that James take to be at the heart of religious reality, moving from a sense of "uneasiness" – "a sense that there is something wrong about us" – to a "solution" that entails "being saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers" (552). And Maxwell's vision accords with Jamesian portrait of the converted individual as a "passive spectator" of "an astounding process performed upon him from above" (250). But the overwhelming emphasis throughout the novel is not on the divine but on the daily, not on the exceptional but on the routine: "I called you in here to let you know my further plans for the Daily News. I propose certain changes, which I believe are necessary. I understand very well that some things I have already done are regarded by you as very

strange. I wish to state my motives in doing what I have done" (45). The spiritless prose itself conveys the routinization of faith.

Still, James and Sheldon both might be said to repudiate institutions, ritual, and symbol. And both might be said to avoid and devalue theology. But whereas Sheldon was struggling to find a way of making religion relevant, James was struggling – as a scientist among an increasingly agnostic educated class – to make religion make sense, which he does in part by insisting that agnosticism is not a rational resistance to the passions, but a single passion. "The Will to Believe" was originally an address given to the Philosophical Clubs of Brown and Yale, an address given "in the midst of our Harvard freethinking and indifference," as he put it (1). "Can you believe what you have *no reason* to believe," he asked his audience, concluding that our belief in scientific truth "is but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up" (9). "Our passional nature [must] decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds." Moreover, "leaving the question open" is "itself a passional decision – just like deciding yes or no – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth" (11).

In *Varieties*, which expresses great faith in the power of science even as it points to what remains beyond the scientific, his point is rather that science and philosophy – the intellect – can eliminate doctrine and "historic incrustations," but not those moments "in the living act of perception where something that glimmers and twinkles and will not be caught" exceeds reflection (496). Although James begins his book by admitting that his definition is "arbitrary," he does everything to make it seem inevitable, inevitable because we live in world that is not fully explicable. "Were one asked to characterize the life of religion is the broadest and most general terms, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (61).

James's account of the "psychological peculiarities" of religious experience emerges from a considerable archive, quoted liberally, his emphasis always resting on "acute fever" as opposed to the "dull habit" that religion has become for mere "practicing Christians." Ceremonies are really beside the point. Rather, "self surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point of the religious life, so far as the religious life is spiritual and no affair of outer works and ritual and sacraments" (233). And this act of self-surrender is not the kind of self-sacrifice that one reads in Sheldon's novel, but the surrender to a wider life. Sheldon's faith is practical; James's is mystical. "The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely understandable world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region ... we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world" (560). James the pragmatist circles back to the question of worldly effects. But here his psychological investigation becomes ontological: it is not longer a question, really, of beings – but of Being in the most profound sense. This is an account of religion that has nothing of the social force it has for Durkheim or, in an American context, for John Dewey, for whom individual psychology increasingly made no sense.

This definition of religion has irritated many readers of James. Recently the philosopher Charles Taylor published his Gifford Lectures (Edinburgh) as *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisted*, a book completed in 2000, and thus providing us with the advantage of thinking about "religion today" before 9/11. For Taylor, it is important to resist James's individualism and to adopt a neo-Durkheimian understanding of faith in the contemporary world. But my sense is that Taylor risks succumbing to the picture of contemporary U.S. religion

portrayed by Alan Wolfe, who responds to sociologist (they themselves concluding that "whatever else religion is, it cannot be like everything else) – by arguing that in America today "religion is like everything else. Americans are remarkable for the ways they link their religion to their secular world" (245). He remarks that fewer than 50% of Americans know that the Bible begins with Genesis, and fewer still can name five of the ten commandments. These are not theologically informed Christians but ones who believe that they themselves and their nation state have special access to God, participating in what Robert Bellah has called American "civil religion" (legible in the Declaration of Independence, in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, and in Kennedy's Inaugural Address), which contributes to the missionary zeal with which the U.S. understands itself to be saving the world, integrating its faith into a global public sphere.

Taylor objects to the way that James's emphasis on inner experience as the locus of religiosity prevents him from seeing the way that certain traditions (notably Catholicism) promote "collective connection through a common way of being" and the way that they have facilitated "political identity" and integrity for "suppressed or threatened groups" (24, 114). But this "collective connection" might now be said to lie less in a "common way of being" than in a common political stance that in fact unites members of distinct churches and faiths into homogenizing "fundamentalist" work. This is to suppose that the most vibrant extra-personal dimension of religion now takes place beyond the church. The super churches and the parachurch organizations have been especially good at homogenizing distinct sets of beliefs, distinct practices, distinct convictions into simple political stances. As Susan Harding has put it, in her study of fundamentalist language and politics, what Jerry Falwell and others accomplished in the 1980s was the transformation of fundamentalist Protestantism "from a marginal, antiworldly, separatist people into a visible and vocal public force" (ix). As she goes on to say, "far from bunkering themselves, these

fundamentalists seem to have a vast appetite for worldly ideas and practices – sports, therapy, sex manuals, politics, glossy magazines, television, Disney special effects – which they appropriate selectively and Christianize with great skill and zeal" (ix). For Taylor, what "motivates the Christian right in the United States is an aspiration [both] to reestablish something of the fractured neo-Durkheimian understanding that used to define the nation, where being American would once more have a connection with theism, with being 'one people under God,'" and to "reestablish versions of the moral consensus that enjoyed in their day neo-Durkheimian religious grounding" (98). The expense of that aspiration, though, is gay marriage, abortion rights, and Darwin. Curiously in his account of the Christian right, he unselfconsciously repeats the Christian's right's own rhetoric of marginalization, as though the U.S. today were not a neo-Durkheimian nation. William James may have considered religion a private matter, but Jerry Falwell does not.

In his efforts to preserve some place for religion in a secular culture – his effort to imagine the place of a religious life within a scientific world – James ended up defining religion in *another* particularly American way, a way that is integral to that distinction between church and state that is taken to be such a hallmark of American politics. In the so-called "Wall of Separation Letter," carefully composed in response to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802, Thomas Jefferson aimed not to protect the government from religion, but to protect religion from government. "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state."[14] Jefferson was reasserting this separation on

the grounds that everyone should have the right to believe what they choose to believe.

But the image of belief here is intensely private: the relation between man and his god. Jefferson's conviction was not only (as many scholars have argued) that this wall protects religion from government, but also that government was in fact powerless to control individual conviction: seven years later he wrote that "No provision in our Constitution ought to be dearer to man than that which protects the rights of conscience against the power of its public functionaries, were it possible that any of these should consider a conquest over the conscience of men either attainable or applicable to any desirable purpose."[15] Thinking of recent legal and political events in Mississippi, Georgia, and Wisconsin, one might lament that Jefferson didn't spend time addressing, as well, the question of how "public functionaries" might be protected from the "rights of conscience." Though Taylor argues that "our relation to the spiritual is being more and more unhooked from our relation to our political societies" (111), few analysts of contemporary U.S. culture wouldn't say that our political societies have in fact hooked themselves to some relation to the spiritual, and that "private" relations to the spiritual increasingly appear as fully public declarations on behalf of reenchanting the world in which we live, including the world of the public school science classroom. Those humanists who want to remind us of all that good that religion has done in the history of the U.S. need to explain how they understand the harm that religion is currently doing, unless in fact they want the idea of divine creation taught not in courses on cultural history, not in courses on comparative religion, and not in courses on anthropology, but in courses on biology.

NOTES

[1] *Time* (vol. 168, no. 20), 13 November 2006. In the cover story, David Van Biema points to the two overriding questions: "Can Darwinian evolution withstand the criticisms of Christians who believe that it contradicts the creation account in the *Book of Genesis*?" and "can religion stand up to the progress of science?" (49-50).

[2] Quoted by George Johnson, "A Free-for-All on Science and Religion," *New York Times* Nov. 21, 2006, D1, 6. A video of the proceedings of the forum can be found at tsntv.org. Richard Dawkins is the author of *The God Delusion*.

[3] National Center for Science Education (hereafter NCSE), "Origin of life bill revived as amendment," http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2006/MS/64_origin_of_life_bill_revived__4_27_2006.asp For an overview of the Center's argument, see Scott and Branch.

[4] For basic information on *Selman v. Cobb County* (2004) and its aftermath, see "Evolution Education and the Law," http://www2.ncseweb.org/wp/?page_id=107 and http://www2.ncseweb.org/wp/?page_id=141.

[5] Both the Mississippi bill and the Georgia case point clearly to the processual nature of U.S. law, and the fact that localities (counties, cities, states) can act in violation of federal law in the hope of escaping its jurisdiction, of finding a loophole, or of changing the law. Thus – to make reference to a topic that came up during the conference – the legal status of flag desecration in the U.S. can hardly be understood as settled for good. In *Halter v. Nebraska* (1907), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld statutes prohibiting the desecration of the flag; in *Street v. New York* (1969), the Court ruled that laws against "contempt" of the flag violated the First Amendment's protection of free speech; in *Texas v. Johnson* the Court effectively struck down the flag desecration laws in any state, and reaffirmed that ruling by striking down the Flag Protection Act passed by Congress in 1989; but from 1990 through 2006, Congress has continued to try to overrule the Supreme Court by excluding flag desecration from the First Amendment. On June 28, 2006, the Senate failed by one vote to attain the two-thirds majority to support an amendment to ban the desecration of the American flag. All this is to say, then, that the law is more fragile than it may seem.

[6] See "Wisconsin Anticreationism Bill Dies," http://www2.ncseweb.org/wp/?p=129.

[7] See Harding 60-64.

[8] See Said 32-36.

[9] As S. Sayyid puts it, what we mean by religion and politics, and what we mean by the difference between them, is "the product of a particular history"

(14). A more complicated account of Zizek's position would engage some of his other recent publications, notably *The Fragile Absolute*; and *On Belief*.

[10] See Brown.

[11] For an extension of Asad's critique, where he addresses not the universalization of this parochial understanding but the impossibility of separating the private and public spheres, see 259-60.

[12] The quotations can be found in Neighbors. For fuller biographical information, see Miller.

[13] For an important glimpse at the public confrontation of various faiths, see Bramen, ch. 6, "East Meets West at the World's Parliament of Religions," 250-292.

[14] For the text on line go to http://www.usconstitution.net/jeffwall.html. For a useful and brief introduction to the early national period, see Hudson.

[15] Jefferson, *Letter to the Methodist Episcopal Church at New London, Connecticut, Feb. 4, 1809*. For an on-line excerpt, see http://candst.tripod.com/ref3.htm.

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