IN THE SPIRIT OF GLOBALIZATION: THE SPREAD OF AMERICAN RELIGIONS IN SECULAR EUROPE

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There is a common notion that in modern Western society, religion is on the decline and science has replaced it as a way of looking at the world. In Europe, where studies show much lower rates of church attendance than in the United States, there has been a surprising growth of America-born religions. This project looks for patterns in the growth of these religions, as well as the current body of theoretical explanations. It explores whether there is evidence that the very other-worldliness and supernatural orientation of a religion or religious movement establishes a sense of community.

First, American religious communities and movements with active missionaries, established religious communities, or supporting organizations in Western Europe were identified and growth patterns were sought. While there were ample data on some groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and the Church of Scientology, current data on others were unavailable, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the New Age Movement. This was largely because the former groups are institutionally more focused on communications and the gathering of data. Additionally, comparative growth and decline was unclear because of differences in data gathering methods and definitions.

Riis suggests that a secular public life does not negate a personal supernatural orientation.

This is significant in that American religions, born in a climate of individualism, may allow unique opportunities for personalization. Intravigne and Ambrosia’s findings support the notion that religious activity is not expected primarily in uneducated, poor or otherwise struggling groups. In Italy, the primary targets of new religious movements are executives, university students, and plebeians. Gordon Melton dismisses “social unrest theories” by pointing to historical data that have been erroneously used to define religion as “epiphenomenal.” He suggests that religion is as much an agent of change as a result of change. His data also confirm that, despite statistics on church attendance, “country by country, Europe has welcomed far more new religions (per million persons in the population) than the United States.”

A triangulation of the current scholarship suggests a need for further research, employing well-defined methodology and objective analysis, stripped of unquestioned assumptions, into the role of religion in contemporary Western thinking.