Religion has been an important factor shaping the development of political parties and party systems in many parts of the world. Religious cleavages have had a formative influence during processes of democratisation and the links between religiosity and voting are well-established. As a general rule, citizens with higher levels of religiosity (especially when measured by frequency of attendance at a place of worship) are more likely to vote for parties of the centre right, while the least religious, as well as those identifying as having no religion, are more likely to cast their votes for parties of the centre left (Norris and Inglehart, 2012). The impact of secularisation, as the process of religious decline in the face of modernisation, thus contains the potential to disrupt, undermine and refashion party politics in new and unpredictable ways. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the impact of secularisation in three key arenas of world politics: on Christian Democratic parties in Europe, on Islamist parties in Muslim majority countries, and on the Republican Party in the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump.

The secularisation debate

Secularisation is one of the most enduring and contentious concepts in social science. Originating with thinkers such as Comte, Marx and Durkheim during the nineteenth century, the core assertion is that as society develops under conditions of modernity, so religion will progressively decline, lose its social and political influence, and perhaps disappear completely. The dynamics underpinning this process are said to be shaped by a number of interconnected factors. Scientific and technological advances undermine religious claims about the nature of reality, multiculturalism and social diversity increasingly relativise religious worldviews and challenge notions of universal truth, processes of functional differentiation lead to religious provision in areas such as health, education and welfare becoming supplanted by specialised secular agencies, and globalisation and the emergence of an individualised consumer culture disrupt traditional community structures and erode the role of religion as an agent of social cohesion. Once underway, processes of intergenerational decline cause each generation to become progressively less religious than the last, putting religion on an inexorably downward path (for an overview see Fox, 2018).

Supporters of secularisation theory typically make the case for religious decline by pointing to a range of empirical indicators. Much of these are drawn from Western Europe, Canada,
Religion, modernisation and secularisation

Australia and New Zealand, and show significant declines across multiple dimensions of religiosity – including membership of religious organisations, attendance at places of worship, personal belief in God and trust in religious authorities – throughout most of the post-war period. In recent decades this trajectory has been compounded by a substantial rise in the proportion of adults self-identifying as being ‘non-religious’ (see Norris and Inglehart, 2012).

Critics raise a number of conceptual and empirical objections to these claims. Amongst these are the methodological problems of obtaining sufficient (and sufficiently robust) data on which to base judgements about the decline or otherwise of religion (many states do not collect data about religion and available datasets often measure religiosity in different ways), the related difficulties of defining and measuring ‘religion’ itself (critics claim that an emphasis on participation in formal rituals fails to capture other aspects of religiosity such as the endurance of ‘religious values’, and may not be applicable to types of religion such as Buddhism or folk religions) and the idea that statistical indicators of decline might be a sign that religion is changing form, shifting away from traditional institutionalised models to more flexible, individualistic categories such as the ‘spiritual but not religious’ (e.g. see Ruff, 2005; Ammerman, 2013; Etrit, 2018).

Critics relatedly highlight what they see as the ethnocentricity of secularisation theory, pointing out that the idea of secularisation had been designed to explain historical developments in Western Europe, based on particular Western liberal conceptions of the relationship between religion and the public sphere (Clark, 2012), and maintain that the Western European experience of religious decline is a global anomaly (this being described by Casanova (2014) as a case of ‘European exceptionalism’). Indeed, as critics point out, far from being in decline religion is advancing in many other regions of the world, notably illustrated by the rapid globalisation of Islam and the upsurge in evangelical Christianity throughout Africa and Latin America. The high levels of religiosity in modernised and technologically advanced countries such as the United States also show that religion is not a fixed and rigid category, but a dynamic and adaptive social force capable of responding to the pressures and challenges of modernity in novel ways. The so-called return of religion to public life during the latter years of the twentieth century, visibly manifest in high-profile events such as the Iranian Revolution, the rise of the Christian Right in the United States and the emergence of religious nationalist and fundamentalist movements, further underscores this point (on which see Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2009; Hjelm, 2016).

Proponents of secularisation theory have responded to these criticisms in a number of ways. Supporters maintain that measuring the endurance of religion through the use of amorphous terms such as ‘religious values’ and the growth of ‘spirituality’ dilutes the concept of religion to the point where it risks losing all meaning (e.g. Bruce, 2013), and draw attention to the fact that (despite lagging behind Western Europe) religion is nevertheless in measurable decline in the United States as well as other technologically developed countries, such as Japan (e.g. see Reader, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015). One of the most important theoretical developments in secularisation theory responds to the criticisms levelled against it by focusing on the role of existential security. This revised theory argues that people turn to religion as a way of dealing with conditions of uncertainty, and claims that as societies gain greater control over their social and physical environments (via technological advances, democratisation and welfare systems) the psychological need for religion declines (Norris and Inglehart, 2012). By comparing global levels of religiosity with measures of existential security using data drawn from human development indices (including variables such as income inequality, educational attainment and infant mortality rates), proponents of this approach claim that religion is predominantly expanding in societies that are less developed and hence subject to greater levels of uncertainty. Thus, the proportion of adults claiming that religion is ‘very important’ is highest (at 64 percent) in agrarian societies, where technological advances are at their weakest, declines to 34
percent in industrial societies, which are characterised by greater environmental control and the 
application of scientific rationality, and is at its lowest (at 20 percent) in post-industrial societies, 
which enjoy the highest levels of human development. A similar pattern is found for belief in 
God (falling from 78 percent in agrarian societies to 72 percent in industrial societies and 69 
percent in post-industrial societies) and a belief in life after death (which declines from 55 per-
cent in agrarian societies to 44 percent in industrial societies, but then rises to 49 percent in 
post-industrial societies, perhaps reflecting a shift to post-material values afforded by high levels 
of security) (see Norris and Inglehart, 2012).

These debates around secularisation highlight a number of important issues. One key point is 
that the notion of secularisation should not be thought of as being bound up with a singular 
thoretical approach but is more accurately seen as a loose collection of ideas (described by 
Gorski (2000) as a ‘secularisation paradigm’) replete with a variety of causal influences and 
possible trajectories. The secularising impact of modernisation is neither clear-cut nor straight-
forward. Assessing the impact of secularisation on political parties and party systems thus needs 
to take this multidimensional character into account. The following sections examine this in 
respect of three general trends: the influence of secularisation on Christian Democracy in 
Europe, the secularisation of Islamist parties in Muslim majority countries, and the relationship 
between the Christian Right and the Trump presidency in the United States.

Christian Democracy

The case of Christian Democracy in Europe presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, 
Europe is the most secularised region in the world, but on the other Christian Democracy is the 
continent’s most successful form of political party since the emergence of mass democracy. The 
key to unlocking this paradox can be found in the particular combination of structural factors 
and the strategic behaviour of leading religious and political actors that together created the 
political space for Christian Democracy to emerge. These developments had their origins in the 
social conditions and cleavages that shaped the nascent Western European party systems during 
their formative phase in the latter third of the nineteenth century. A defining factor at this point 
was the religious geography of the region, which had remained largely unchanged since the 
Westphalian settlement of 1648, consisting (broadly speaking) of Protestant countries in the 
north, Catholic countries in the south, Orthodox Christian countries in the east and a mixed 
confessional band of countries in-between. While Protestant countries tended to be structured 
around class-based cleavages and did not, as a rule, develop strong Christian Democratic parties 
(the notable exceptions being the Netherlands and Norway), a central characteristic of those 
countries that did form successful Christian Democratic parties was a sharp division between a 
right-wing, rural-conservative bloc loyal to the Catholic Church and a secularist bloc comprised 
of liberals and socialists that posed a strong challenge to the interests of the Church on a number 
of critical issues, such as education, the family and disestablishment. In response, the Church 
sought to mobilise a range of grassroots organisations in its defence, a number of which (and 
against the stated wishes of the Church) formed religiously inspired political parties. Although 
most of these proved to be unsuccessful, they nevertheless provided a valuable political resource 
for the later emergence of Christian Democratic parties (for an overview of these developments 
see Kalyvas and van Kersbergen, 2010).

Christian Democratic parties were established in the period following the Second World War 
and were distinguished from their inter-war forerunners in a number of important ways. With 
the political position of the Catholic Church having been weakened by its close relationship to 
fascist regimes, the new Christian Democratic parties avowedly renounced authoritarianism and
openly committed themselves to promoting liberal democracy (the Church itself did not do so until the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s), effectively framing themselves as a bulwark against the threat of Communism. Christian Democratic parties also promoted the process of European integration and adopted the language of compromise and pluralism, becoming umbrella organisations (a classic ‘catch-all’ party) able to accommodate a diverse range of social groups, classes and sectors. Critical to this endeavour was a particular construction of religious identity. While the new Christian Democratic parties drew on notions of Christian principles and ethics, the religious component was effectively toned down in order to secure the widest possible social appeal to both Christians and non-Christians alike. Instead, the emphasis was on broader normative themes, turning the religious dimension into ‘a nebulous humanitarian and moral concept’ (Kalyvas and van Kersbergen, 2010).

In many ways this particular framing of the Christian dimension was a strategic response to processes of secularisation that were now underway throughout Western Europe. The decline in the numbers of avowedly religious voters and a wider social movement away from religion compelled political leaders to present a form of religious morality that could connect with citizens in secular terms. The overall result, according to van Kersbergen (2008), was to establish a form of ‘unsecular politics’ in which religious ideals and symbols were used as a tool of political mobilisation but refracted in ways that could appeal to societies that were becoming less religious (see also Brocker and Künkler, 2013).

This model also proved to be highly successful. Drawing electoral support from across the social and political spectrum, Christian Democratic parties went on to dominate the electoral landscape in a variety of countries, being especially strong in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland, helping to create the central features of post-war European politics, including the construction of welfare states, corporatist policy-making processes, a mixed economy and the movement towards closer European integration. However, during the latter part of the century the fortunes of Christian Democratic parties began to decline. This was driven by a number of interrelated factors. Socioeconomic changes such as globalisation, de-industrialisation and shifting demographics progressively undermined the social balance of corporatism and put welfare states under growing pressure, the fall of Communism removed one of the central planks of appeal for Christian Democratic parties, multiculturalism helped to establish new political cleavages based around notion of race, ethnicity and religion while processes of party dealignment transformed traditional voting patterns, leading to the rise of floating voters and new political parties such as the Greens and the New Right. These dynamics put Christian Democratic parties in a keen political bind. Attempting to move politically to the left or right would undermine the centrist basis of their catch-all appeal, while trying to emphasise their religious element would cost them support from non-Christian voters, and especially from the non-religious citizens that now constituted a growing share of the electorate (see Keman and Pennings, 2006; Duncan, 2015).

From this point Christian Democracy lost its historical dominance in Western Europe. However, at the same time, a new opportunity was presenting itself with the demise of Communism in Eastern-Central Europe. Yet Christian Democracy did not find political favour in the way that many hoped it would. A number of key differences between the conditions of post-war Western Europe and post-Communist regimes help to explain why political success did not materialise. In Poland, for example, the collapse of Communism removed the threat of a common enemy (thereby reducing the value of an anti-Communist stance) and most new parties of the centre right supported the values of the Catholic Church, thereby limiting the need for religious leaders to seek out political support and establish close links with any one particular party. The influence of secularisation was also a critical factor. Many post-Communist
societies were by this point highly secularised (largely related to the experience of Communism itself) and overt Church support for political parties was not something that would have attracted a wide measure of public support. Indeed, where Christian Democratic parties have proved to be most successful is in countries where such parties could point to some kind of historical legacy effect, having been involved in state-building efforts during the interwar period – such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Lithuania (on these points see Bale and Szczerbiak, 2008; Grzymala-Busse, 2011).

Nevertheless, while secularisation continues across Europe, religion remains an influential (albeit declining) guide to voting behaviour in the region. Research has shown that support for Christian Democratic parties is still higher from citizens with stronger levels of religiosity (Duncan, 2015). And while the success of Christian Democratic parties may have been predicated on adapting religious identity to the constraints of a secularising social and political context (Brocker and Künkler, 2013), scholars need to be careful not to assume that this trajectory will simply continue. Research suggests that religious groups mobilising in reaction to secularisation can politicise religious elements and push religious issues back into the formal political domain. One way in which this might possibly manifest itself in the European context is through an alignment with current nationalist and populist trends, perhaps leading to the re-emergence of Christian ideas mixed with liberal secular values posed as a defensive reaction to Islam (on which, see Vollaard, 2013). While the decline of religion poses an obvious problem for religiously inspired political parties, religion has the capacity to adapt in new and unexpected ways.

Democracy in Muslim countries

Measuring the impact of secularisation on political parties in Muslim majority countries faces two particularly salient problems. The first is that the extent of secularisation in many Muslim countries is largely unknown. Social, cultural and in some cases legal restrictions (including blasphemy laws and prohibitions on apostasy) mean that the scale of the non-religious population remains substantially hidden from view. In the absence of detailed and comprehensive work in this area, there is simply no way to know for sure what the real situation might be (see Sevinç et al., 2018). The second issue is a notable ‘democracy gap’ throughout much of the Muslim world. While the dynamics and causes of this continue to be debated by scholars, democratic politics remains the exception rather than the rule. According to the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2017) there are a total of 19 ‘full democracies’ in the world, none of which are in Muslim majority countries. The highest listed Muslim majority country, Malaysia, is classed as a ‘flawed democracy’ and ranked 59th, while the next Muslim country, Indonesia (the third largest democracy in the world), is in 68th position. Research by Pew (2013) has also found high levels of support for religious (Sharia) law in Muslim countries. While this varies widely (just 12 percent of Muslims in Turkey support the idea of making laws in this way), significant majorities can be found in countries such as Indonesia (72 percent), Pakistan (84 percent) and Afghanistan (99 percent).

Public attitudes to democracy, however, run contrary to these trends. Muslim countries have been found to possess greater support for democratic ideals than countries in many other parts of the world (especially in Eastern–Central Europe and Latin America), and while Islamic societies record high levels of support for rule by religious authorities, they are not unique in this regard. Higher than average levels of support for the involvement of religious authorities in politics have also been found in countries such as the United States and Greece, and are also prominent in many parts of Africa (see Norris and Inglehart, 2012).

Nevertheless, high levels of religiosity and a receptivity to religious appeals have (unlike Christian Democratic parties) encouraged political parties in Muslim countries to put greater
emphasis on issues of religious identity. Since the 1990s religiously inspired parties have taken part in elections, and have won positions of power, in a number of Muslim countries, including Morocco, Algeria, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait, Egypt, Yemen, Indonesia and Pakistan.

None of this means that secularisation processes are devoid of any impact. One way in which their influence can be seen is through the inclusion-moderation hypothesis. The key argument here is that engagement with democratic institutions and the availability of political opportunity structures provide incentives for radical groups to move away from, or abandon, anti-democratic forms of politics. In this way, Islamist groups which typically reject democracy and seek to impose religious law and theocratic forms of governance, can be encouraged to adopt a more moderate, pro-democracy stance (see Nasr, 2005; Schwedler, 2011). While this does not necessarily imply a diminution of their religious appeal, the move towards moderation can nevertheless lead to a process of internal secularisation. In a similar fashion to the way in which Christian Democratic parties downplayed their religious appeal to maximise their electoral support, radical groups seeking to take their place within the political systems of Muslim majority countries face pressures to reframe their religious beliefs and practices in secular terms, to commit themselves to ideas of popular sovereignty and rule of law and to engage in processes of electoral compromise and the peaceful settlement of disputes (Brocker and Künkler, 2013; Gurses, 2014).

Evidence suggests that the pressures and incentives of conventional electoral politics can have a moderating impact on Islamist parties, compelling them to adopt strategies of centrism, compromise and pragmatism. Useful illustrations of this process can be seen in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in de-radicalisation measures (Schwedler, 2011), and Turkey, where the Justice and Development Party (AKP) sought to adopt a public discourse conforming to the bounds of a secular constitution and to appeal to voters who would have reacted negatively to an overtly religious appeal (Hale, 2005). More recently, the Ennahda Movement – the main Islamist party in Tunisia (to date, the only real democratic success of the Arab Spring) – has also elected to pursue a strategy of moderation in order to reap the benefits of engagement in democratic politics (McCarthy, 2018). A general, longitudinal trend in this direction has also been observed. In their study of elections in Muslim majority countries during the period 1970–2009, Kurzman and Naqvi (2010) have suggested that moderation pressures have encouraged Islamist parties to slowly liberalise their political platforms, de-emphasising the ‘Islamic’ aspect of their political identity and putting greater emphasis on themes of democracy, women’s issues and minority rights.

That said, the inclusion-moderation hypothesis is not without its critics. Some scholars have questioned the value of labels such as ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’, noting that both descriptions cover a variety of often very different positions. Others have pointed out that the use of a more moderate form of rhetoric does not necessarily entail a genuine commitment to democratic politics, and that Islamist groups can use this as a political strategy in order to disguise their real motives and attract support prior to switching back to more radical ideas. Indeed, as events involving the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the AKP in Turkey have shown (where both sought to promote religious ideas upon gaining power), inclusion in democratic political processes does not mean that moderation is the inevitable direction of travel (see Schwedler, 2011; Brocker and Künkler, 2013).

Other critics have argued that political inclusion alone is not sufficient for moderation, and that a commitment to abide by the norms of democratic politics has often been shaped by other factors. Nasr (2005), for example, highlights three main structural variables. The first is the role of state repression. In countries where the path to democratic transition has been shaped by periods of military rule (such as Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt) the impetus for moderation has
come from the conditionality of the military withdrawal from political life. In these circum-
sstances the military retained the potential to return to politics in the event that democracy was
threatened by radical groups (as indeed happened in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in
post-revolutionary Egypt). These pressures are combined with the role of economic forces. A
growing middle class is said to be essential for democratic civil society to take root, and a bur-
gleoning private sector is needed to reduce the power of the state over society (a central barrier
to democratisation in many Muslim countries being the rentier state problem associated with an
over-reliance on oil). Third, the role of electoral competition is also considered to be essential.
Here, the presence of a strong and competitive, multi-party politics encourages strategies of
centrism, pragmatism and compromise.

An alternative model developed by Lust (2011) centres on the interactions between three
strategic actors: an authoritarian elite, secularist opponents and Islamists. In countries where fear
of Islamism was high, and where the regime had excluded Islamists from the political process
(such as Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia) secularists were more likely to align themselves with the
authoritarian elite in order to prevent Islamists from gaining power, thereby impeding the
development of democratic politics. In countries where the regime had allowed Islamist groups
to enter the political system (such as Jordan and Indonesia), on the other hand, the fear of
Islamism was subsequently reduced, encouraging secularists to press for democratic reforms.
These dynamics, it is argued, help to explain why democracy has thus far failed to take root in
much of the Middle East (where fear of radical Islamism remains high) but has developed in
Muslim countries in Asia and North Africa (where fear of radical Islamism is far lower).

While secularisation in Muslim majority countries can be seen in the process of political
moderation, its impact can also be felt in the comparative lack of electoral success for Islamist
parties. Notwithstanding some notable exceptions – such as the case of Algeria in the early
1990s, in which an impending victory for Islamists was forestalled by the election being can-
celled (see Warner, 2012) – electoral breakthroughs have been few and far between. The scale
of this failure is laid bare in research conducted by Kurzman and Naqvi (2010). In an analysis of
89 parliamentary elections in Muslim countries in which an Islamist party took part over a
40-year period, they found that the average performance amounted to 7.3 percent of the
overall vote and just 6 percent of the seats. In one respect these findings are something of a
surprise given the relatively high levels of support in Muslim majority countries for rule by
religious authorities. One possible explanation for the lack of Islamist success is the presence of a
strong religious/secular divide. In research examining a decade and a half of opinion polls in
Muslim countries, Driessen (2018) finds that declarations of support for religious laws fall away
when voters are confronted with the practical realities of Islamist parties in government.

The Christian Right in the United States

The United States is often considered to be an outlier among liberal democratic nations: sustain-
ing high levels of religiosity while being economically and technologically advanced. Religion also
plays a key role in US electoral politics. This is expressed principally through close links between
the Republican Party and the Christian Right, a political movement comprised predominantly of
white evangelical Protestants (with a smaller number of like-minded Catholics, Mormons and
Jews) that formed in the 1970s to promote conservative political views on issues such as abortion,
prayer in public school and (later) homosexual rights (Norris and Inglehart, 2012; Barrett-Fox,
2018). Although the political fortunes of the Christian Right have been mixed – helping the
Republicans to win the presidency under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush but suc-
cumbing to a series of sexual and financial scandals and registering limited policy successes

Steven Kettell
(Clifton, 2004) – their influence appears to have increased dramatically with the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential campaign. Trump secured extremely high levels of support from the Christian Right, winning 81 percent of the white evangelical vote (Pew Research Center, 2016b) and since the election has continued to cement the relationship. Amongst the key measures that have been taken here include: appointing evangelicals to leading positions within the Trump administration – notably Mike Pence (as Vice President), Betsy DeVos (Secretary of Education), Ben Carson (Housing and Urban Development) and Rick Perry (Secretary of Energy) – making evangelical-friendly appointments to the Supreme Court (Neil Gorsuch and, controversially, Brett Kavanaugh), expanding religious exemptions in areas such as reproductive and gender rights, as well as pledging to abolish the Johnson Amendment prohibiting churches from publicly endorsing political candidates. The Trump administration has also used overt religious messaging in its targeting of Muslims under a travel ban and in attempting to justify a policy of separating immigrant children from their parents at the border (Barrett-Fox, 2018).

Many commentators have wondered how the two sides have come to be so aligned, not least given Trump’s less-than-impressive moral character and clear lack of personal interest in religion. Indeed, in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, the success of Trump and the failure of the preferred candidates of the Christian Right – Ben Carson, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz – was seen by many commentators as a defeat for their agenda. Moreover, the subsequent high levels of evangelical support for Trump was in many respects based on a negative view of his presidential opponent rather than a positive endorsement of his own political qualities. Polls prior to the 2016 election found that 35 percent of white evangelical Protestants were intending to vote for Trump not because they necessarily approved of his views, but because he was not Hillary Clinton (Pew Research Center, 2016a).

The explanation for the close relationship between the president and the Christian Right is to be found in the way that Trump has successfully appealed to the sense of entitlement and long-held grievances nursed by many evangelical Christians about their role in American society. One key factor driving this is the projection of a demographic transition in which white Christians will soon become a minority in the United States. In 1972 almost three-quarters (74 percent) of Americans identified as white Christians, by 2012 that figure was just over half (55 percent). And while around seven out of ten Americans aged 65 or over are white Christians, the proportion in the 18–29 age group falls to just three in ten (FORUM, 2017). In this context, the support of the Christian Right for Trump is readily explicable in terms of a raw cost–benefit analysis. As Barrett-Fox (2018) puts it: ‘Trump’s relationship with conservative Christians is highly transactional: votes in exchange for political power or at least for a sense of continued cultural and political importance despite a demographic decline.’ Or, as Sutton observes (FORUM, 2017), Trump offered evangelicals ‘not a partner to pray with, but a hitman whom they trust will root out and destroy much of what is threatening them’ (also see Brittain, 2018; Whitehead et al., 2018).

Yet here too, amidst the politicisation of religious identity, the influence of secularisation can be observed. This is captured most vividly in the rising proportion of US adults now identifying as religiously unaffiliated (a category known as the ‘nones’). According to research conducted by Pew (2015), this group, which includes a variety of perspectives such as atheists, agnostics and those who are still religious but who are not a member of any formal religious organisation, has experienced a dramatic rate of growth in recent years, increasing from 16 percent of the adult population in 2007 to 23 percent by 2014. Moreover, with the nones tending to lean politically towards more progressive, liberal causes and being more likely by a considerable margin to vote for the Democrat rather than the Republican Party, this process of secularisation adds to the threat posed to the future of the Christian Right.
Ironically, scholarly research into the rise of the nones suggests that this growth has, to a significant degree, been driven by the overt politicisation of religion by the Christian Right themselves. The argument here is that the rapid growth in the numbers of the religiously unaffiliated coincided with the increasing influence of the Christian Right within the Republican Party and has been fuelled by the extreme positions taken by evangelicals on moral issues such as gay rights and abortion (see FORUM, 2017). Studies also indicate that rise of the nones has been particularly notable in Republican states and at periods of visible political conflict over controversial moral issues, suggesting that the activities of the Christian Right have tainted the very idea of being religious to the extent that moderates and liberals are increasingly less willing to self-identify in this way (Djupe et al., 2018).

Moreover, while research has also highlighted the quasi-religious nature of Trump’s style of political campaigning – replete with sacred objects (red baseball caps emblazoned with the slogan ‘Make America Great Again’), ritualistic elements (mass rallies of devotees) and an emphasis on mythological beliefs (such as a nativist form of American exceptionalism) (Fernandez and Clark, 2018) – and while some have seen Trump as constituting the logical end-point of decades of evangelical political action (‘a white male candidate who reinforces biblical sexual and gender norms, is suspicious about immigrants and Islam, and, most importantly, believes in white America’, FORUM, 2017), others have maintained that Trump represents an essentially secularised version of the evangelical worldview. For all the overt appeals to the Christian Right, Trumpism denotes a political project that is completely devoid of any meaningful religious content. The result, as Gorski (2017) notes, is that it becomes nothing more than ‘a reactionary and secularised version of white Christian nationalism’.

Conclusion

Debates about the future of religion have been central to the social sciences since their inception. Secularisation remains a contested topic, with critics raising a number of questions about its conceptual, methodological and empirical claims, but there is substantial evidence to suggest that support for religion – certainly in its institutionalised form – has declined in the face of modernity. Yet secularisation can appear and make itself felt in a number of ways. This can be seen in terms of its impact on political parties and party systems. In Western Europe Christian Democratic parties dominated the post-war electoral landscape but were forced to downplay their sense of religious identity to conform to the social conditions of an increasingly secularised environment. In Muslim majority countries, where religious identities are more politically salient, Islamist parties have often responded in a similar way to the structural pressures and strategic incentives of democratic politics, moderating their electoral stance as part of a process of internal secularisation. In the United States, where religion also plays a key political role, the politicisation of religious identity by the Christian Right, particularly in conjunction with their support for President Trump, has been critical in driving the growth of the religiously unaffiliated and has itself fuelled the secularisation process.

Note

1 Data are taken from World Values Surveys, 1981–2001.

References


