

# The Political Origins of Religious Liberty: A Theoretical Outline\*

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## Abstract

Economists of religion have shown a strong relationship between religious pluralism and religious vitality. Likewise, many scholars have associated the presence of religious pluralism in a country to the degree that a government regulates its religious economy. A relatively free religious market enhances pluralism, which in turn promotes religious participation. But this begs a further question: Why do political actors choose to regulate or deregulate the religious economy? In other words, what political factors determine the level and nature of religious liberty? In contrast to explanations that see religious liberty arising from the natural progression of intellectual history, I argue that laws and regulations governing religious organizations are determined by variables that affect the political self-interest of government officials. While there are often strong reasons why politicians would want to create regulations that favor a monopolistic church, political actors will liberalize the religious market when such action favors their political survival, ability to attract government revenue, and/or enhances economic growth and trade. Moreover, religious deregulation is more likely to occur under conditions where it is difficult to suppress natural religious pluralism. The development of religious liberty in the United States and Latin America are offered as preliminary examples of how this deductive theory can be applied.

**KEYWORDS:** religious liberty, religious economy, United States, Latin America

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\*The author would like to thank Roger Finke, Laurence Iannaccone, Mark A. Smith, Rodney Stark, Carolyn Warner and others who have offered advice after hearing oral presentations of this article. I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions contained herein.

Within the realm of public policy, the issue of religious freedom has become a hot topic in recent years. In 1998, the 105th U.S. Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 105-292) requiring the Department of State to provide an annual overview of religious liberty and persecution around the world for consideration in foreign policymaking. That same year, representatives from several countries met in Oslo to reaffirm the principles of religious freedom contained in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Domestically, a number of countries have amended their national constitutions or passed broad-ranging legislation to promote (or inhibit) the rights of religious organizations, including the United States (1993 and 1999), Russia (1990 and 1997), Mexico (1992), Finland (2001), and Colombia (1994).

To date, few scholars have sought to explain the rise of religious liberty in any systematic way. Most studies have either emphasized the consequences of varying forms and levels of religious liberty or regulation (cf. Chaves and Cann 1992; Monsma and Soper 1997; Stark and Iannaccone 1994), discussed the normative implications of varying interpretations of religious freedom (cf. Segers and Jelen 1998),<sup>1</sup> or provided detailed historiographies with little attempt to develop a generalizable theory for the emergence of religious liberty. Only Roger Finke (1990), Charles Hanson (1998), and John Anderson (2003) have attempted to provide theoretically developed explanations for the rise of religious freedom, albeit only in one case: the early United States. Part of this general neglect can be attributed to the fact that the answer to this puzzle (if it is considered a puzzle at all) is thought to be obvious. The secularization paradigm, which has dominated social scientific studies of religion until recently, appeared to provide the solution. From this perspective, religious liberty (as well as religious pluralism and a general decline in spirituality) was seen as a natural outcome of the modernization process. The question about the origins of religious liberty was not seen as a question at all.

This article attempts to remedy the neglect of this important topic by providing a general theoretical framework for studying the origins of religious liberty. Instead of viewing movement toward liberty as a natural and monotonic process, I recast the question in terms of the governmental regulation of religious organizations. The higher the level of regulation, in general, the less religious liberty exists within a society. This reframing allows for temporal variations in the degree and nature of religious freedom. Also, it moves the analysis of the question away from broad-based structural-functional and systemic explanations, which present a myriad of methodological and theoretical problems, and toward an emphasis on human agency. After all, laws regulating religions are made by

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<sup>1</sup> The normative literature on religious freedom, centering mostly on interpretations of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, is too voluminous to cite here. For the broad parameters of the debate, see Clarke Cochran's detailed preface to Segers and Jelen (1998).

individuals who undertake such action with purposeful intent. Understanding the motivations of those individuals and their ability to enact legislation under varying constraints is central to understanding the emergence of religious freedom in a more macroscopic sense. Using a microeconomic approach to religion, I argue that variations in religious liberty can best be explained by examining the political opportunity costs of the principal actors involved in defining church-state relations, that is, political and religious leaders. While this assertion is quite broad, the framework I develop below allows one to posit a number of environmental contexts and then make analytical predictions as to the form and level of religious regulation within a nation. These predictions can then be empirically tested against other hypotheses.

*RELIGION AND POLITICS: THE THEORETICAL STATE OF THE ART AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW QUESTION*

For much of the twentieth century, the topic of religion and politics was of marginal interest to most scholars. Secularization theory, which reigned supreme in the sociology of religion, predicted that spirituality (which was assumed to be related to superstition) would gradually disappear from social (and private) life with the accumulation of scientific knowledge and the growth of secular bureaucracies. The latter would replace churches as the preferred institutional means of guaranteeing public welfare. However, the last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgent scholarly interest in religion. Nowadays, it is almost trite to begin a piece by noting that the “explosion” of religious fundamentalism—Islamic, Christian and Jewish—has dealt a serious challenge to secularization theory.

Not surprisingly, most of the new research on religion has sought to explain the emergence of religious fundamentalism (e.g., Armstrong 2000; Juergensmeyer 2000; Tibi 1998). The broad focus of this literature has been to explain the social *demand* for fundamentalist forms of religion, largely resulting from the tumultuous onslaught of modernization and the related trends of industrialization and urbanization. As Pablo Deiros remarks, “converts [to religious fundamentalism] have often been drawn from a rootless and disconnected subculture, from people whose extended family networks disintegrated in the rush to the cities and who therefore had lost much of the social infrastructure needed to survive there” (1991: 161). It is ironic that such explanations use the same variable as secularization theory to turn that theory on its head: “Modernization” not only was helpful in explaining secularization in Europe, but is also seen as the cause of increased religious activity outside of Europe!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Western Europe is seen as the quintessential example of secular society and is used as the basis for comparison. The United States is often seen as an “exceptional” case given its unusually high

In an attempt to explain cross-national variations in religious expression and belief without relying on secularization theory, a new group of scholars have turned attention to *supply-side* variables, including institutional design, market structure, and government regulation (see Warner 1993 for a survey). One of the central findings of this research is that religious monopolies reduce overall levels of religious participation and belief (Iannaccone 1991; Stark 1992).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, given the assumption of pluralistic religious preferences in society, it is argued that religious monopolies cannot be maintained except by governmental fiat (Stark and Bainbridge 1987: 96). Chaves and Cann (1992) and Stark and Iannaccone (1994) find a strong negative correlation between the degree to which European religious markets are regulated and active religious participation. Likewise, Gill (1999a) demonstrates that the best predictor of evangelical Protestant growth across Latin America is the degree of religious freedom within countries, not demand-based variables associated with “social anomie” (as measured by urbanization, industrialization, and political crisis).

While supply-side theorists have pointed to the important role government regulation plays in explaining cross-national variation in religiosity, they have neglected to explain the origins of religious liberty, preferring instead to use it as an exogenous independent variable. Nonetheless, their studies, when taken one logical step backward, provoke an important question: If variation in religiosity

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levels of church attendance and religious belief for an industrialized country. While such a noticeable outlier would usually provoke a further examination of the underpinnings of a theory, secularization theorists have largely dismissed the United States as an anomaly or, in certain instances, even theorized that religious expression in the United States is nothing more than secular rituals (Wilson 1966). It is interesting to note that while the literature linking modernization and secularization largely examines Western Europe, a theoretical linkage between modernity and increased religious zealotry (fundamentalism) is posited for Third World countries. This regional bias in the study of religion mirrors a similar pattern in political economy. Modernization theory (a broader theoretical rubric under which secularization theory falls) concentrates its empirical analysis on OECD countries, while developing nations are analyzed through the lens of dependency theory. It may be the case that the new “social anomie” theories of religious fundamentalism that are gaining widespread attention owe more to dependency theory than to secularization theory even though both rely on the concept of “modernization” for explanatory leverage.

<sup>3</sup> The exception that appears to disprove this theory is Islam. While many Islamic countries maintain religious monopolies and proscribe the proselytizing activities of non-Muslims, religious participation and belief tend to be high in these countries. Not surprisingly, most studies of Islamic fundamentalism tend to favor demand-based explanations, since supply-side arguments seem to hold little relevance—there is only one supplier. However, on closer examination, it becomes apparent that religious competition is actually intense in these countries, albeit within one broad religious tradition. The institutional structure of Islam is such that individual clergy (*ulama*) must raise their own revenues via active recruitment of members; their career livelihood depends on vigorous participation of the faithful. The lack of an overarching hierarchical institution within Islam (in contrast to Catholicism) results in a wide array of competing groups (Kalyvas 2000).

and denominational pluralism are determined by the degree of religious liberty, what explains the variation in this latter variable? Given the demand-based (sociological) focus of most other studies, it is understandable that this question never really arose until recently.

This is not to say that no one has examined how governments regulate religious organizations (to use the language of the supply-siders). Within this group of supply-side scholars, Finke (1990) offers a brief explanation of how religious deregulation came about in early American history (see below). Scholars working from other perspectives have presented other explanations, though none in a rigorous, generalizable fashion. Instead, discussion of this topic is dominated by single case studies in which historical contingency plays a large role (cf. Hanson 1998; Helmstadter 1997). For the most part, explaining the origins of religious liberty in a more general manner has been neglected for so long because the “answer” has seemed obvious. Secularization theory, which dominated the sociological literature on religion for more than a century, conditioned the scholarly belief that religious freedom was the natural outgrowth of the demise of spirituality in the public square. Commenting on the general state of the field, Helmstadter notes that

Secularization, in the sense of putting the secular aspects of life at the center and marginalizing religion, has been fitted into the master narrative as a kind of extension of Protestantism, progress, and modernization. To see the decline of religion and the secularization of society as inevitable, was ... the logical postscript to the narrative in which liberalism and religious freedom are *seen as predestined goals in the progress of mankind* (1997: 7, emphasis added).

The “inevitable” and constant global process of modernization is seen as the principal cause of religious freedom. Institutionally, modernization produces greater functional differentiation and larger state bureaucracies, eliminating the public need for church-provided welfare services. Separation of church and state becomes the first step toward religious liberty (since it is difficult to have true religious liberty where there is one officially sanctioned church).<sup>4</sup>

At the ideational level, modernization purportedly coincides with a certain set of values privileging the role of individual (as opposed to communal/corporatist) choice. Such choice is not possible without freedom of conscience. José Casanova summarizes this uniquely Western notion:

[R]eligious freedom, in the sense of freedom of conscience, is chronologically “the first freedom” as well as the precondition of all modern freedoms. Insofar as

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<sup>4</sup> See Monsma and Soper (1997) for the nuanced exceptions in Europe, namely, the United Kingdom.

freedom of conscience is intrinsically related to “the right to privacy”—to the modern institutionalization of a private sphere free from governmental intrusion as well as free from ecclesiastical control—and inasmuch as “the right to privacy” serves as the very foundation of modern liberalism and of modern individualism, then indeed the privatization of religion is essential to modernity (1994: 40).

As may be noted, the thesis linking modernity, secularization, and religious liberty is a close cousin to modernization theory that was popular in political science, economics, and sociology during the 1950s and 1960s. However, whereas modernization theory has come under critical scrutiny at both the theoretical and empirical levels, secularization theory and explanations for the rise of religious liberty have yet to face such examination.<sup>5</sup>

While this type of explanation is seemingly convincing at a very general level, it has a number of theoretical and methodological problems. First, methodologically speaking, a constant cannot explain variation. Both the degree and nature of religious liberty have exhibited extensive variation across nations and throughout time.<sup>6</sup> The obvious countercritique here is that “modernization” also varies across spatial and temporal dimensions. Yemen is much less modern today than the United States; therefore we should not expect the two to have similar degrees of religious freedom. Unfortunately, without independent measures of “modernization,” this explanation risks becoming tautological: The presence of modernity is associated with religious liberty, whereas one of the conditions for being “modern” is having religious liberty. No studies using this explanation implicitly or explicitly, to my knowledge, undertake such a controlled comparison. Moreover, a casual glance of variation in religious liberty using relatively common sense measures of “modernization” (e.g., level of industrialization, GDP per capita) suggests that little if any correlation exists between these two variables. Stephen Monsma and Christopher Soper (1997) detail how five Western nations,<sup>7</sup> all of which could be considered equally “modern,” maintain distinctly different forms of church-state relations. Some of these relationships, they argue, lead to distinct disadvantages for some denominations.<sup>8</sup> Mark Chaves and David Cann (1992) and Rodney Stark and

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<sup>5</sup> Less so the former (secularization theory) than the latter (explanations for religious liberty). See Warner (1993) for a survey of recent challenges to the secularization thesis.

<sup>6</sup> For more about conceptualizing and measuring the “degree” of religious liberty, see below.

<sup>7</sup> The countries are the United States, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Monsma and Soper argue that in the cases of Germany and the Netherlands, state sponsorship of multiple denominations is potentially discriminatory toward Islamic groups, which, because of their decentralized nature, cannot be worked into the traditional means of financing these groups. Likewise, they argue that in the United States, a strict separationist interpretation of the First

Laurence Iannaccone (1994) note similar variation across highly modernized West European countries. In prior work (Gill 1999a), I have quantified the substantial variation in religious liberty across countries in Latin America and noted that more “modern” nations such as Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico possess substantially lower levels of religious liberty than “less developed” countries such as Ecuador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. While none of these studies directly measure “modernization,”<sup>9</sup> a casual reading suggests a poor correlation between the level of “modernity” and religious freedom.

A second weakness befalling secularization theories of religious liberty relates to an affliction that affects all broad-based systemic and structural-functionalist arguments: the problem of missing agency.<sup>10</sup> The process of secularization, church-state separation, and the resulting religious freedom is presented as a “natural occurrence,” independent of human choice. While it is doubtful that any scholar would admit to such a crude rendering of history, the lack of a rigorous causal explanation of the origins of religious freedom leaves us with the sense that little human agency is involved.

Ideational perspectives that suggest that religious liberty arises from the diffusion of certain “modern” ideals suffer from a similar problem. Consider W. Cole Durham’s argument. He puts forth the idea that the spread of Enlightenment philosophy (most notably that of John Locke) is the principal determinant for religious freedom:

Contrary to what might initially be thought (and what had been thought for centuries), Locke contended that respect for freedom of choice in matters of religion (and more generally with respect to comprehensive world views) is a source of both legitimacy and stability for political regimes. This insight constituted a kind of Copernican Revolution in political theory .... Locke revolutionized politics by suggesting how religious (and by extension, political) freedom could sow political order from religious seeds that had always been assumed to be the ultimate source of anarchy. The Lockean insight thus opened up the possibility of seeing the political cosmos from a new perspective. By

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Amendment privileged secularism over religion, thereby acting in a potentially discriminatory manner. Without commenting on the normative implications of their study, the central point I want to make for this study is the substantial variation in how religious organizations are regulated (including subsidized) by the state.

<sup>9</sup> Gill (1999a) includes various measures of “industrialization” and “urbanization” in a regression analysis in which religious pluralism was the dependent variable, though the intent was not to measure “modernization” per se, but “social anomie.” The theoretical argument under scrutiny was that rapid industrialization leads to social anomie, which in turn prompts people to convert to new religious movements. While the link between industrialization and religious liberty was not tested explicitly, no significant collinearity existed between these variables when included in the same regression.

<sup>10</sup> See Cohen (1994) for an excellent discussion of the weaknesses of structural-functionalism.

placing respect for freedom at the center of the constellation of values, and by recognizing that respect for freedom and dignity of individuals is itself a moral and religious truth of the highest order, this revolution transformed the grounds for legitimizing and stabilizing political communities. ... This idea was initially theoretical, but it became a central aspect of the “lively experiment” with religious freedom in the United States (1996: 8–9).

Durham continues by noting that a general process of “globalization” is facilitating the acceptance of this ideal:

Growing consensus on religious freedom reflects a more general need to address the reality of pluralism in the global setting. ... globalization itself is enhancing our sense of pluralism. ... These patterns of global demographic pluralism are likely to be conducive to religious freedom and application of the Lockean insight into the stabilizing force of respected pluralism in much the same way that American pluralism paved the way for meaningful institutions of religious freedom two centuries ago (1996: 11).

Other such ideational explanations (cf. Mecham 1966) have a similar structure. Modernity gives rise to certain ways of thinking (namely, Enlightenment liberalism), which, when adopted by a sufficient number of people, alters the political environment in favor of religious liberty. Again, the problem of tautology rears its ugly head: We know that liberal ideas have done their work only when we see religious liberty. The presence of religious liberty is taken as a sign that modern (liberal) ideas exist.

Empirically, it is worth noting as well that the Enlightenment’s home country, was much less liberal in matters of religious freedom than one would expect from a purely ideational perspective. Puritans, Catholics, Quakers, and others did not flee England because it was a bastion of religious liberalism.<sup>11</sup> Quite the opposite. And high school civics textbooks to the contrary, although the colonists grew enamored with the ideas of the English Enlightenment, true religious freedom was not written into law until the early 1800s (see below) and, in many cases, until the late 19th century. The point here is that revolutionary ideas do not automatically translate into social reality. Ideas, by themselves, may be necessary for creating change, but they are not sufficient. History is littered with popular ideas that never flowered. Willing individuals who are capable of overcoming costly social and political hurdles are needed to realize ideas in an institutional form. It thus becomes apparent that religious liberty is the product of specific laws made by specific people who overcame a plethora of obstacles at specific times in history.

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<sup>11</sup>I realize that many of these groups, namely, the Puritans, left England before the height of the Enlightenment. Nonetheless, religious dissidents continued to stream out of England even after liberals had promulgated their doctrines.



The functional explanations inherent in secularization theory and ideational approaches give little indication of the political maneuvering that took place to put these laws into effect. They typically downplay the role of interests and the ability of humans to make specific choices in situations in which multiple options exist.<sup>12</sup>

This paper proposes a general deductive theory regarding the political origins of religious liberty that incorporates the role of human agency via the use of rational choice theory. This theory places interests, as opposed to ideas (or culture), at the center of the analysis. Without denying a role of ideational factors (e.g., values, ideologies), rational choice theory provides a useful starting point—the self-interested, utility-maximizing individual—from which to build more complete theories. Assuming that humans have some degree of control over their own history (as opposed to having their actions predetermined by some structural arrangement), it makes sense to begin with a theory that places human agency at its core.

The success of building a general theory not only will rest on its empirically accuracy, but also will be determined by its ability to be applied widely across space and time. This approach yields an immediate tension. Placing emphasis on empirical validity and human agency pushes one in the direction of “thick description,” wherein the specific actions of individuals in unique historical situations become all-encompassing in the explanation. Generality is hard to achieve, since individuals (with varying interests and calculating capacities) change over time and historical situations rarely repeat themselves exactly. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assert that humans behave in patterned ways and that any pattern is subject to generality. Striking a balance is critical to gaining maximum explanatory “leverage” (cf. King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Lave and March 1975). The following theory attempts to strike such a balance by arguing that, in general, political actors respond to changing opportunity costs that affect their ability to remain in office and maximize revenue. It will be argued that these are relatively ubiquitous goals that are shared by almost all political actors irrespective of time or place. Laws pertaining to religious freedom will be affected by how politicians respond to these changing opportunity costs as well as some specific historical conditions. As for the latter, I will outline a general set of conditions that appear to have a general impact on the degree to which religions are regulated. I hope this theory will be useful as a general framework for scholars examining specific cases, making use of a methodology that was recently termed *analytic narrative* (Bates et al. 1998).

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<sup>12</sup> The inherent problem with structural-functional theories is that only one choice exists, thereby denying the role of human agency.

*AN OPPORTUNITY COSTS MODEL OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY*

Religion has long been considered beyond the purview of economic analysis. Scholars typically assume that the behavior of religious actors derives from a set of ideational (theological) principles that transcend the self-interested motivations of *homo economicus*. Yet, while religious actors may be motivated by “high ideals,” it is still obvious that they exist in a world of scarcity wherein difficult choices about how to allocate resources must be made on a daily basis.<sup>13</sup> For example, a Catholic bishop might face a difficult choice of whether to spend his limited budget on putting more priests through the seminary or expanding day care facilities in his diocese. The latter may have the effect of immediately increasing the attendance of young families at services, while the former option has a longer-term (and more risky) payoff of improving the quality and perhaps the quantity of religious services offered. An evangelical Protestant organization might face a difficult choice of whether to send its one hundred eager missionaries to Brazil or Russia. Where are more converts likely to be made? Even Mother Teresa, perhaps the noblest of souls, had to make tough decisions about how to divvy up her scarce time and energy to help the most people (Kwilecki and Wilson 1998).<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, religious actors also must deal with individuals who might not share their high ideals. Scoundrels, scalawags, and rogues are not uncommon in political life. Successful interaction with such individuals often requires sacrificing strict obedience to high principle for strategic expediency. This is *not* to say that religious actors are hypocrites when it comes to living in the secular world; it merely notes that high principles do not always guide behavior. A Jesuit president of a Catholic university may decry the crass materialism of modern

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<sup>13</sup> Whether actors are motivated by “high ideals” or “economic rationality” may be a moot point. “High ideals” typically inform a person’s fundamental preferences (i.e., ends), while “rationality” speaks more to means. A person who maintains the most altruistic of goals is still limited by scarce resources and must make difficult (economic) choices as to how to best realize those altruistic goals. For the analyst, the trick is first to determine what a person’s basic preferences are, then to specify the constraints the person faces. Ideational perspectives are typically useful in discerning the former; rational choice theory is superior in the latter.

<sup>14</sup> While a provocative application of rational choice theory, Kwilecki and Wilson’s analysis of Mother Teresa commits a fatal methodological error by seeking to explain a single case. Rational choice theory relies on probabilistic and marginal analysis. In other words, the goal of rational choice theory is to explain the average behavior of the typical consumer/producer when faced by a marginal alteration in their environmental constraints. Specific exceptions to rational choice predictions will always exist, but unless those exceptions constitute a significant proportion of the cases examined, they do not necessarily destroy the predictive power of the theory. For instance, the existence of martyrs who are willing to give their life for a cause does not detract from the rational choice prediction (and empirical finding) that most people stop well short of zealous actions in their personal religious practice.

society and the neglect of the poor yet aggressively pursue financial contributions to sustain his university, often diverting those funds from other philanthropic causes (e.g., building homeless shelters). A preacher calling for greater ecumenical relations between faiths might very well also lobby to have restrictions placed on “cults” that are stealing members from his flock. All told, rational choice theory provides us with some leverage in explaining tough decisions of resource allocation. The theory does not tell us much in the way of what a specific individual’s high ideals or other preferences might be, but many general preferences can be assumed safely as the basis for theory testing. Thus to the extent that religious actors and institutions exist in a world of scarcity, economic theory can have some bearing on explaining behavior in this realm.

### *The Religious Marketplace*

To begin the process of building a theory of the origins of religious liberty, it is first worthwhile to begin with a number of definitions. These definitions will help to delineate the scope of the study as well as helping to place the issue of religious liberty in a framework analogous to that of economics.

*Definition 1: Religious goods* are fundamental answers to the deep philosophic questions surrounding life that have as their basis some appeal to a supernatural force.<sup>15</sup>

*Definition 2: A religious firm* (i.e., a church or denomination) is an organization that produces and distributes religious goods.<sup>16</sup>

*Definition 3: A religious marketplace* is the social arena wherein religious firms compete for members and resources.<sup>17</sup>

*Axiom 1:* Religious preferences in society are pluralistic.

People normally do not think of churches as equivalent to manufacturing plants or retail stores. Yet these organizations do supply things that people want, as evidenced by the fact that people attend religious services voluntarily. These consumers (parishioners) purchase these goods with their financial contributions and time commitments.<sup>18</sup> As with most marketplaces, religious markets can be

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<sup>15</sup> Stark and Bainbridge provide a more specific definition of religious goods based upon a theory of compensators (1987, 25–42).

<sup>16</sup> *Produces* here could also mean “interpret from divine revelation.” The question of where religious beliefs come from or their ultimate validity is not the focus of this study. Also, the author acknowledges that the term *church* carries Christian connotations, but it will be used interchangeably with *religious firm* for the sake of rhetorical simplicity.

<sup>17</sup> Gill (1998) makes the argument that proselytizing religions are primarily market-share maximizers. That is, churches seek to win over as many parishioners to their spiritual message as possible.

<sup>18</sup> The very nature of religious goods make them difficult to price. Because they are largely ideas and it is difficult to prevent their diffusion, free riding is a common problem with religions: People

monopolized or highly competitive. Given the natural low barriers to entry into the religious marketplace,<sup>19</sup> and assuming a variety of religious preferences in society, the “natural” state of the religious market is one of competitive pluralism (Gill 2003a; Stark 1992; Stark 2003: 15–120). This assumption differentiates this analysis from cultural explanations. Culturalists tend to assume a high degree of homogeneity in religious beliefs within national boundaries. For purposes of this analysis, we will take the “varied preferences” assumption as an untested axiom.<sup>20</sup> The main implication of the varied preferences assumption is that such apparent homogeneity (e.g., Catholicism in Latin America) is due to the presence of a religious monopoly. Such a monopoly can be maintained only by governmental regulation, as Stark and Bainbridge assert:

No religion can achieve a monopoly out of its own resources alone. No faith can inspire universal, voluntary acceptance, except, perhaps, in time, primitive societies. ... unmet religious needs will prompt competing religious groups in a society as long as a free market exists. Religious monopoly can be achieved only by reliance on the coercive powers of the state. Neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant clergy could prevent religious dissent (heresy). Only the king’s soldiers, or the threat of the king’s soldiers, could suppress religious dissent (and then only to a degree, for even at the height of Catholic dominance of Europe, dissent flourished in all the cracks and crannies of society and constantly burst forth) (1985: 508).

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can learn about the answers to life without paying for the provision of those ideas. However, exact pricing is not a requirement for the existence of a market. As the computer age has demonstrated, pricing intellectual property and policing intellectual property rights are difficult tasks. Theology, in many respects, represents the ultimate intellectual good. For a discussion of how the medieval Catholic Church priced its theological goods (including indulgences), see Ekelund et al. (1996).

<sup>19</sup> It is relatively cheap to create an ideology and start disseminating it. There are very few capital costs associated with startup religions. However, low barriers to entry do not guarantee market success, as many Internet firms are now discovering. And although low barriers to entry exist in the religious marketplace, there still may be a significant economy of scale in the production of religious goods. Since religious goods are credence goods and require credible testimony about the quality of the good, there may be “strength in numbers.” The adage that “five hundred million Muslims can’t be wrong” applies here. As for an economic analogy, anybody can start an e-commerce website, but it helps to be Amazon.com.

<sup>20</sup> It is possible to test this assumption. One possible methodology would be survey research. However, in a monopolized market, respondents might not be aware of religious alternatives and would claim either a preference for the monopoly faith or no preference at all. If many respondents reply the latter yet indicate a strong belief in God or “importance of religion,” this could be taken as indirect evidence that a plurality of religious differences does exist that the monopoly religion cannot satisfy (cf. Gill 2003b). Alternatively, a historical study could be conducted. When laws regulating non-monopoly religions are relaxed, religious activity and pluralism would tend to increase if the varied preferences assumption holds (cf. Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Finke and Iannaccone 1993).

Observing this relationship between religious pluralism and government coercion sets up the definition for religious liberty.

*Definition 4: Religious liberty* (or freedom) represents the degree to which a government regulates the religious marketplace.<sup>21</sup>

Such a definition might seem trivial, but it shifts the analysis toward the examination of specific regulatory laws aimed at religious organizations. Broad-based ideational theories of religious liberty shy away from examining specific laws and see the level of religious liberty in society as a property of the general ideological milieu. Such laws can be as encompassing as constitutional declarations of the right to free conscience or as specific as zoning regulations on church property. Indeed, the latter might be more important than the former in determining the exact level of religious liberty within a society (though the former is a basic prerequisite). As the general economic literature on economic regulation points out, small and specific regulations can have an enormous impact on the conduct of commerce in society. Today, almost every country provides some constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. On closer examination, however, the specific manner in which religious groups are regulated can vary extensively (Chaves and Cann 1992; Gill 1999a; Monsma and Soper 1997).

Just as commercial businesses have different preferences for the degree of regulation in society (e.g., preferences about tariff rates), so too do religious firms. By adding one additional axiom, we are able to derive a proposition related to these preferences:

*Axiom 2:* Proselytizing religious firms are market-share maximizers; they seek to spread their brand of spiritual message to as many followers as possible.

Those firms that have already achieved a monopoly or dominant market share will be on the defensive against losses and will seek policies that promote that goal. Witness the U.S. auto industry in the 1970s, for example. Since an “offensive” strategy of retooling an entire industry is inherently expensive and risky (with profits realized only in the long run if at all), appealing for government restrictions on competitors was the means of first resort. Upstart sects, on the other hand, can be expected to take a more aggressive proselytizing stance (accumulating market share) and will favor policies that lower their costs of evangelization. Hence:

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<sup>21</sup> While not central to the thesis, *religious toleration* can be defined as the level to which norms in society allow for the operation of dissenting sects. It is possible to have a deregulated religious economy with high levels of religious intolerance. As religious intolerance can impose significant costs on religious minorities—from social ostracism to outright violent attacks—these social norms and values can play a substantial role in limiting the religious activity. The foregoing analysis is restricted, however, to the origin of actual legislation. To the extent that governments do not choose to monitor and enforce their own laws pertaining to religious freedom, this study could intersect with the study of religious intolerance.

*Proposition 1:* Hegemonic religions will prefer high levels of government regulation (i.e., restrictions on religious liberty) over religious minorities.<sup>22</sup>

Religious minorities will prefer laws favoring greater religious liberty.<sup>23</sup>

While most economic analyses take firms to be profit-maximizing entities, here I take the declared goal of proselytizing religions at face value—that is, they want to spread the Word of God to as many people as possible (given the limitations of their own resources). This keeps the spirituality within religion and avoids critiques of materialistic reductionism (cf. Stark 2000). (Remember, an economic analysis does not necessarily imply that an actor is out for material gain; it merely says that the actor is trying to maximize some given goal.) By way of this axiom, it becomes possible to derive policy preferences. Spiritual monopolies that have a captured market prefer to keep the barriers to entry in the religious marketplace high. Although rhetorically in favor of freedom of conscience, they will seek laws that require minority religions to gain the government’s official permission to proselytize, restrictive visas on foreign missionaries, zoning and media restrictions on alternative faiths, and so on. This tendency did not escape the attention of Adam Smith as early as the late 1700s, when he wrote thus of the dominant religion in any given country:

The sect which had the good fortune to be leagued with the conquering party, necessarily shared in the victory of its ally, by whose favour and protection it was soon enabled in some degree to silence and subdue all its adversaries. ... The clergy of this particular sect having thus become complete masters of the field, and have their influence and authority with the great body of the people being in its highest vigour, they were powerful enough to over-awe the chiefs and leaders of their own party, and to oblige the civil magistrate to respect their opinions and inclinations. [The clergy’s] first demand was generally, that he [the civil magistrate or ruler] should silence and subdue all their adversaries; and their second, that he should bestow an independent provision on themselves [i.e., subsidize the dominant faith] (1976 [1776]: 792).

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<sup>22</sup> This proposition is an example of how rational choice theorists can derive logically the preferences of actors rather than merely stating them as given. As is noted elsewhere (Gill 1998: 195–196), a major critique of rational choice theory is that it takes preferences as given. However, this does not mean that preferences simply are asserted in an ad hoc or tautological fashion. Careful attention must be paid to justifying the assumed preferences as I have attempted to do here. Being explicit about these assumptions allows other scholars to modify the assumptions and play out the theoretical logic to see whether alternative, testable implications can be advanced.

<sup>23</sup> In the case in which a traditionally dominant religion exists under a state with an explicit “atheistic” (or anticlerical) ideology (e.g., the Soviet Union, Mexico 1917–1994), the dominant religion can be thought of as a minority player in that it does not wield the coercive power to counter the dominant producer of social values and norms.

By contrast, minority religious groups that could potentially win converts in an undersupplied religious economy will seek legislation that lowers restrictions on “religious trade.”

We can further derive from this proposition the preferences of religious groups under pluralistic conditions, in which no one firm commands a majority market share, that is, every denomination is a minority denomination. In such situations, all religious firms will prefer a minimum level of religious liberty that allows all *existing* faiths to practice freely, within reason.<sup>24</sup> (They are likely to oppose a completely laissez faire religious market that allows new religions to arise.<sup>25</sup>) Imposing restrictions on one faith could potentially lead to religious conflict wherein one’s own denomination finds itself under repressive legislation. Ecumenical relations are most likely to develop under such conditions—an implication that follows directly from Stark’s work (2001: 119–120) and was similarly observed by Smith:

[H]ad the conquering party never adopted the tenets of one sect more than those of another, when it had gained the victory, it would probably have dealt equally and impartially with all the different sects, and have allowed every man to chuse [sic] his own priest and his own religion as he thought proper. There would in this case, no doubt, have been a great multitude of religious sects. ... The teachers of each sect, seeing themselves surrounded on all sides with more adversaries than friends, would be obliged to learn that candour and moderation which is so seldom to be found among the teachers of those great sects, show tenets being supported by the civil magistrate, are held in veneration by almost all the inhabitants of extensive kingdoms and empires, and who therefore see nothing round them but followers, disciples, and humble admirers (1976 [1776], 792–793).

Smith implies here that religious tolerance, supported by laws that do not favor a dominant faith, will lead to increased religious pluralism, as is confirmed by contemporary research linking denominational pluralism to religious freedom (Finke 1990; Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Gill 1999a; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). But it is just as likely, if not more so, that the initial presence of religious pluralism would make the state hesitant to impose any form of legislation that would favor a minority sect over any other minority sect.

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<sup>24</sup> “Within reason” is important here, as it is unlikely that Lutherans or Catholics in the United States would argue favorably for the unrestricted rights of a religion that practices human sacrifice.

<sup>25</sup> Mainstream Christian reaction to the creation of Mormonism is an example here. Likewise, most established faiths are skeptical of laws that allow prisoners to declare create religious belief systems that allow them exemptions from various prison regulations, one of the unique consequences of the short-lived Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

An interesting test case for this proposition is the Roman Catholic Church. Here we have an institutionalized faith that exists in every region of the world yet that varies in whether it is a majority or minority religion. An ideational model of preferences for religious liberty would predict a consistency in the Church's policy across nations, perhaps harking back to the Second Vatican Council's declaration in favor of religious liberty. Alternatively, the interest-based proposition above would lead us to expect variations in Catholic policy positions as determined by the Church's market position. In Latin America, where Catholicism has been dominant for five centuries, the Church has actively sought restrictions on Pentecostals and other upstart evangelical groups (Gill 1998, 1999b). However, in post-Soviet Russia, where Catholics are an expanding denomination, the Vatican has been pressing for greater access against the cries of the historically dominant Orthodox Church (Anderson 2003: 128; Kutznetzov 1996). Likewise, in Asia, Catholics are seeking fewer restrictions on religious activity. These empirical observations favor the interest-based hypothesis as presented in Proposition 1. Here we have an instance of an institution whose leaders' preferences are determined by their self-interested position in the religious marketplace rather than by some constant theological precept. If theology were dictating policy preferences in this case, we would expect the Catholic Church to maintain a consistent position across countries.

#### *Political Incentives in the Religious Marketplace*

As defined above, religious liberty is a matter of governmental regulation. Therefore we should expect the incentive structure of politicians (who are defined broadly for the time being as legal decision makers) to play a significant role in determining the level (and form) of religious freedom in society. Why would politicians want to regulate (or deregulate) religious organizations? This moves us to the central question regarding the origins of religious liberty. We begin with two basic assumptions about the general preferences of policymakers derived from the work of Geddes (1994), Ames (1987), and Mayhew (1974), among others:

*Axiom 3:* Politicians are primarily interested in their personal political survival.

*Axiom 4:* Politicians seek to minimize the cost of ruling.

Policymakers may be driven by a plethora of ideological influences, but if they are not in power, their goals are largely unachievable. They may also seek power for power's sake (or the fame and possible fortune it bestows). In whichever case, retaining power is the primary (instrumental) goal to achieving these other ends. Staying in office requires resources. The more resources are expended to retain power, the less is available for achieving other goals. Politicians have three



general mechanisms for ensuring the compliance of a population: coercion, patronage, and ideological legitimacy. Of these three means, the last is the least costly,<sup>26</sup> leading us to the following proposition:

*Proposition 2:* Politicians will seek ideological compliance of the population when possible.

This naturally provides an incentive for church-state cooperation in that religions tend to be the primary producer of societal norms and values (Gill 1998: 52–53). To the extent that citizens agree that obedience to the government is morally correct or in their best interest, politicians need not devote resources to coercion or paying off constituents. The conveyance of ideological legitimacy frequently comes from the endorsement of religious leaders.<sup>27</sup> Clergy tend to be among the most trusted officials in society. This is due in large part to the inherent nature of producing religious goods. Since religion is, at its very essence, a credence good, consumers may tend to be skeptical about purchasing such goods unless they have some signal about the good's future quality. Suppliers of these goods maintain a strong incentive to develop creditworthy reputations. Clergy frequently live austere lives, make other sacrifices (e.g., celibacy), and engage in rather costly rituals to cultivate an aura of trust among parishioners. In situations of uncertainty, people will look to trusted leaders for guidance. It can be expected that a priest will give carefully considered advice that is in the best interest of his parishioners. If the priest constantly makes poor political decisions, thereby leading his flock to harm, it is unlikely that he will be successful in "selling" his spiritual message. In other words, clergy often act as guiding voices in the secular realm, providing information that would otherwise be costly or unavailable to citizens.<sup>28</sup> Having trusted priests endorse a government or governmental policies

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<sup>26</sup> For an extended discussion of this assumption, see Gill (1998: 50–52) and Taylor (1982: 11–20). Again I refer to the maestro of political economy and religion Adam Smith, who noted that "management and persuasion are always the easiest and the safest instruments of government, as force and violence are the worst and most dangerous ..." (1976 [1776]: 799).

<sup>27</sup> As usual, Adam Smith was one of the first to point this out. "Articles of faith, as well as all other spiritual matters, it is evident enough, are not within the proper department of a temporal sovereign, who, though he may be very well qualified for protecting, is seldom supposed to be so for instructing the people. With regard to such matters, therefore, his authority can seldom be sufficient to counterbalance the united authority of the clergy of the established church. The publick [sic] tranquility, however, and [the ruler's] own security may frequently depend upon the doctrines which they may think proper to propagate concerning such matters. As he can seldom directly oppose their decision, therefore, with proper weight and authority, it is necessary that he should be able to influence it; and he can influence it only by the fears and expectations which he may excite in the greater part of the individuals of the order" (Smith 1976 [1776]: 798).

<sup>28</sup> This leads to a number of testable propositions that are tangential for this study, such as the proposition that people with little access to information about politicians (e.g., because of illiteracy, lack of access to televised news) will tend to place more credence in the recommendations of clergy when considering political action. Also, it should be noted that this

is one means of reducing the costs of ruling. This endorsement comes at a price. Clergy are likely to ask for favors in return, which may entail significant regulations on other religions or government subsidies. As we shall see below, a religion's ability to obtain these demands is a function of the religious market structure.

Politicians also seek to neutralize rivals. Churches offer one potential focal point from which a rival ruler or party can rally opposition. The main reason is that religious organizations possess several features that are helpful in mobilizing collective action, the basic problem inherent in any (mass-based) opposition movement (Lichbach 1995). First, members of a religious community typically hold shared values and mutual expectations about behavior. This enhances trust among individuals, which in turn lowers the uncertainty associated with mutually cooperative behavior in situations resembling a prisoners' dilemma or assurance games (Chong 1991). Trustworthy leadership is also essential for collective action. Leaders who advocate risky action (e.g., protesting a government) will be successful only to the extent to which their followers trust their choices of action. People rarely follow strangers blindly into dangerous situations. As I noted above, religious organizations usually rely on such leadership. Numerous other factors also enhance the ability of religious groups to quickly mobilize collective action, including regularized meetings, financial resources, and established networks of communication. For rulers who are concerned with their political survival, maintaining a tight regulatory control over this potential rival source of authority provides a strong incentive to tamper with laws regulating religion in order to enhance their own political position. This might entail restricting the freedoms or reducing the exclusive legal privileges of particular denominations, especially those that are institutionally aligned with, and unable to back away from a commitment to, a strong rival. Alternatively, it might entail co-opting the support of a religious group with preferential legislation that directly benefits the church in question or restricts the activities of competitive denominations.

Predicting which situation is more likely will depend on a more specific specification of the political and religious environment in question. The bargaining power of the relevant actors, both secular and religious, will condition the outcome for regulatory legislation. Nonetheless, the discussion above points us in the direction of several testable propositions about the relative bargaining

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hypothesis builds on the political economy of interest groups that suggests that such groups act as information conduits for rationally ignorant voters. Since religious clergy tend to reflect a wide range of class and sectoral interests, their recommendations should be more pertinent to broad, general issues that do not affect an individual's specific welfare. Occupational groups (e.g., the trial lawyers association) usually provide more finely tuned information on these issues. This general hypothesis also suggests that professions who deal more in credence goods will have a stronger reputation for trustworthiness than those who deal with more tangible goods.

power of church and state that can then form the basis for a more historically based analytic narrative. The propositions will be followed by a brief empirical discussion that is meant to illustrate the hypothesized relationships. This discussion should be taken not as a definitive test, but rather as an initial attempt to demonstrate the empirical plausibility of the proposition.

The first proposition establishes a general prediction about the deregulation of the religious marketplace and is based on the opportunity costs facing secular leaders:

*Proposition 3 (Opportunity Costs Proposition):* To the extent that political survival, revenue collection, and economic growth are hindered by restrictions on religious freedom or subsidies to a dominant church, religious regulation will be liberalized or left unenforced (de facto liberalization). In other words, when restrictions on religious liberty have a high opportunity cost as measured in terms of political survival, government revenue, and/or economic growth, deregulation of the religious market results.

This hypothesis challenges the notion that religious liberty is the result of a shift in political philosophy (or the victory of one group that holds a more liberal political philosophy). One of the central failings of ideational explanations is that they typically view the debate over religious liberty in isolation from other concerns in the polity; religious liberty is simply a question of two sides debating “right” versus “wrong,” with one side eventually prevailing. In reality, though, legislation is rarely considered in isolation. Positions on one issue condition another. The reason for specific policy choices in one arena may be connected to seemingly unrelated issues. This proposition directs scholars to look for evidence of potential policy trade-offs, something that ideational perspectives do not do effectively.

The general vagueness of Proposition 3, however, is both its principal strength and its principal weakness. By not identifying more specific trade-offs, the proposition can be used to examine a wide array of political settings, both longitudinal and latitudinal. The guiding theoretical principle is that some policy trade-off that affects a politician’s self-interest will be in play during periods of religious deregulation or increased regulation. Yet by not being more specific, the proposition risks tautology. Observation of a change in religious policy can be taken as evidence that political survival is at risk. While the careful use of an analytic narrative can help to alleviate this problem in historical and comparative case studies, I will attempt to lay out additional propositions that delineate more specific environments in which religious deregulation (or increased regulation) might occur.

### *Situations of Political Competition*

I begin this exercise by noting that political survival varies according to the presence of viable opposition candidates for power, that is, the level of political competition. Politicians facing intense rivalries tend to have shorter time horizons (higher discount rates) and less bargaining power relative to organized social actors. These factors are likely to affect policymaking decisions.

*Proposition 4:* The presence of viable secular rivals to power increases the bargaining power of religious organizations, *ceteris paribus*.<sup>29</sup>

*Proposition 4a:* If one religious organization commands hegemonic loyalty among the population<sup>30</sup> and is not tied to any secular political actor, the bargaining power of that church increases, *ceteris paribus*. Regulatory policy toward religion is likely to favor the dominant church and discriminate against minority denominations.

*Proposition 4b:* If a church is institutionally linked (or credibly committed) to one political faction, regulatory policy will favor that denomination if the affiliated faction holds power. Conversely, religious deregulation, punishing the dominant church and rewarding spiritual competitors, is likely when the church's favored faction loses.

*Proposition 4c:* If several competing denominations exist, none with hegemonic dominance, regulatory policy will tend not to discriminate among them (i.e., increased religious liberty). In other words, the presence of competing religious denominations reduces the bargaining leverage of any one particular group, leading politicians trying to curry favor with all.

### *Situations of Minimal Political Competition*

Where political rivalry is minimal, the goal of political survival becomes less pressing, and time horizons lengthen. The opportunity costs of various policies are likely to shift. Policies that bought a politician immediate support under intense competition but that harmed long-term economic growth and revenue collection are likely to be more costly relative to longer-term policies in a new, less competitive environment. For instance, candidates who are running for

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<sup>29</sup> An alternative proposition could be proposed here: Political uncertainty increases the bargaining power of religious groups, as religious leaders are helpful in ameliorating uncertainty. This proposition is worth exploring in an expanded work.

<sup>30</sup> The issue of hegemonic loyalty will become an important issue here. In contemporary Latin America, the Catholic Church is considered to be hegemonic, and a majority of people nominally affiliate with Catholicism. However, in several countries, the active, churchgoing Protestant population equals, and perhaps even exceeds, the active Catholic population—Brazil, Chile, and Guatemala are the central examples. Calling the Catholic Church *hegemonic* in these instances might be a misnomer.

election are more likely to propose tax cuts than are political leaders with secure tenure. These shifts in political opportunity costs can potentially affect church-state relations.

*Proposition 5:* As political tenure becomes more secure, the bargaining power of religious groups wanes.

*Proposition 5a:* Given that restrictions on religious liberty entail monitoring and enforcement costs, politicians will be less likely to enforce them as their political tenure becomes secure.<sup>31</sup>

*Proposition 5b:* As enforcement of restrictions on religious freedom decreases, religious pluralism increases in society (by way of axioms 1 and 2).

In all likelihood, supporting an established church and keeping legal restrictions on minority religions are relatively inexpensive tasks.<sup>32</sup> For most secure governments, the matter of church regulatory policy will simply become a moot issue. (As much as I would like to think that my research on church-state relations is a central topic in political science, I must admit that other matters, such as managing the economy and fighting wars, are probably more important to politicians.) However, if religious pluralism increases and political competition reappears, we are likely to see movement toward religious freedom (as per Proposition 4c). In other words, Propositions 5, 5a, and 5b provide for a means wherein the incentive structures of both secular politicians and religious actors can change over time, allowing for gradual progress toward religious freedom. As the aforementioned propositions imply, increasing political competition among growing religious pluralism is the best environment in which to foster religious liberty. To the extent that “modernization” correlates with increasing political competition, this might help to explain the general trend toward religious liberty over the past several centuries. However, the opportunity costs approach to explaining religious liberty leaves a role for human agency and allows for potential reversals in the progress toward religious freedom.

### *EMPIRICAL DISCUSSION*

The theoretical propositions advanced above were designed to be sufficiently general to explain church-state relations in a wide array of contexts. At best, they

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<sup>31</sup> Likewise, subsidization of religious groups becomes more expensive in that as political survival becomes secure, supporting an established church yields increasingly fewer benefits to the politician.

<sup>32</sup> A casual glance at the budget of any state that has an established church will reveal a pittance spent on supporting that church. Enforcement costs of religious regulations are more difficult to measure, but the lack of major incidents in which people are arrested for nonviolent forms of religious worship seems to provide initial evidence that such costs are low as well.

provide a general framework and point to the importance of understanding strategic choices in the actual lawmaking process behind religious liberty. To make full use of these propositions, it is necessary to lay out the specific context underlying the decision-making process in each case. This enables the scholar to preserve the uniqueness of the case while still being able to generalize about church-state relations. What follows is a very brief discussion of two historical periods: the United States following the War of Independence and Latin America during the 1800s. While the two cases set up an interesting contrast, they are not designed to be rigorous test cases. Rather, they are presented as illustrations demonstrating that the theory above is, at a minimum, plausible (Eckstein 1975).

### *The Early United States*

Contrary to what primary school students in the United States read about the heroic Pilgrims, the colonies were not established as bastions of religious freedom. On the contrary, most dissenting sects left Britain not only to escape the oppressive nature of Anglican establishment, but also to create a restrictive establishment of their own (Finke 1990: 610–611). Congregationalists dominated New England, Episcopalians and Presbyterians controlled the lower colonies, and Quakers established Pennsylvania (Finke and Stark 1992: 59–60). Unfortunately for these denominations, the political, social, and geographic environment of colonial America made it difficult to prevent even newer dissenters from arriving and claiming land. The high availability of land made it easy for minority religious movements to escape local restrictions on their conduct. It also allowed dissenters to avoid paying church taxes to “enemy” denominations. Mandatory tithing creates a strong disincentive for individuals to join “non-official” denominations, as this would imply paying both the official church tax and making donations to one’s new church. As historian Thomas Curry notes: Because the Virginia [establishment] model of the Church of England continued over the course of its first century to make only relatively moderate demands in the area of worship, it provided the colony with a high degree of social uniformity. This very homogeneity served to make life difficult for such outspoken dissenters, as did exist there. Beginning in the late 1630s, those who fell under that heading, finding themselves hard-pressed at home, began moving into the neighboring colony of Maryland (1986: 30).

Just as with heresy in medieval Europe (when centralized policing authorities were rare), enforcement of local establishment laws in the colonies inevitably became cost prohibitive. Individuals who were not happy with the strict religious conditions found in Plymouth or Salem could easily migrate elsewhere, as one of the most famous migratory dissenters, Roger Williams, and others like him did when they fled Puritan territory to settle the colony of Rhode Island (Ahlstrom

2004: 166–183). The result in America was a patchwork of locally established churches that tended to reflect the boundaries of the colonies themselves, with the frontier territories open to expansionary sects such as the Methodists and Baptists. With colonies such as Rhode Island permitting a variety of denominations to establish townships and have their members freely move about, it became difficult for any religious stronghold to remain “puritanical” in the long term.

It is commonly understood that religious liberty is more or less guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. However, one must look beyond constitutional declarations to see the real impact of regulatory behavior on religions. At the time of its drafting, the “establishment clause” pertained only to the federal government. There were no proscriptions on individual states preventing them from sponsoring a single denomination or enacting laws deleterious to the freedom of religious expression. Indeed, the last established church to be abandoned was in Massachusetts in 1833. Eventually, though, guarantees of the security of religious practice became part of every state’s legal code (Levy 1999: 79–102). Political and economic realities predating the U.S. Constitution dictated this choice. First was the general shortage of skilled labor. Excluding valuable immigrant workers because of their religious creed would only slow economic production and chisel away at the tax base of local governments, which were badly in need of revenue at the time (Finke 1990: 611–612). George Smith notes that the early emergence of religious toleration in New Netherland (New York) developed from the commercial impulse of the Dutch West India Company (W.I.C.) that sought to settle the area:

Turning a profit was the basic aim [of settlement]; the idea of establishing an outpost of Dutch society in North America was never first in the minds of the directors of the W.I.C. ... [T]he W.I.C., beginning in 1629 with the “patroonship” idea, launched a series of experiments to attract immigrants to New Netherland, not, however, with any marked success. Indeed, the inability of the company to populate the region was one of the chief reasons for its fall to the English in 1664. ... New Netherland’s commercial character gave birth, very early, to a situation of religious pluralism and the accompanying de facto toleration of a wide variety of religious viewpoints. Already in 1643 a Jesuit priest visiting at New Amsterdam observed, “No religion is publicly exercised but the Calvinist, and orders are to admit none but Calvinists, but this is not observed; for besides the Calvinists there are in the colony Catholics, English Puritans, Lutherans, Anabaptists ... etc.” The growing desire of the Dutch W.I.C. to populate the province added Jews and Quakers to this religious mélange (Smith 1973: 12–13).

Contrast this to Virginia, with a plantation economy that relied more heavily on the importation of slave labor. Because Virginia had no strong need for free laborers, the Church of England was able to gain a privileged legal position over

other denominations. Nonetheless, the ease of mobility in the colonies and the lack of a “strong centralized episcopacy” made it difficult to impose denominational uniformity in the colony (Curry 1986: 30).<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, strict laws prohibiting the practice of some faiths would also dampen interstate trade. Baptist traders from Rhode Island would be loath to travel to New York if they were to be subject to legal persecution for their beliefs. The conflicting desires to cultivate commercial exchanges among the colonies while simultaneously promoting religious orthodoxy in defined territories nearly resulted in a trade war in New England:

In 1659 the [Puritan-dominated] United Colonies [of New Haven, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Plymouth] wrote to Rhode Island to point out that Quakers were entertained there and asking that they be removed, lest the contagion spread. Otherwise, the letter hinted, the colonies might have to take further steps for their own protection. Rhode Island interpreted this as the threat of a trade embargo and was clearly frightened by it. Its president, Benedict Arnold, replied in a conciliatory fashion, declaring that his colony wished to retain good relations with its neighbors. ... Shortly thereafter, in a letter to John Clark, its agent in England, the Rhode Island Assembly revealed its real feelings. The letter acknowledged that the Quakers were indeed making themselves a nuisance to the other colonies, but that Rhode Island had no reason to charge them with breach of the civil peace. ... As it turned out, the answer was almost anything short of economic sanctions, an answer that the perceptive Rhode Islanders might have gleaned from a look at the New Haven laws, which permitted Quakers to trade in the colony as long as they did not preach (Curry 1986: 22–23).

Just as creating a common currency was in the individual interest of all states, so too was a minimal level of religious freedom common across borders.<sup>34</sup>

Politically, the cost of enforcing religious liberty laws would have been frightfully high, especially in frontier states. While some denominations tried to maintain strict control over the beliefs and practices of the local population, de facto religious pluralism and freedom gradually resulted from the mere fact that people could easily up and move if they did not like the laws under which they were living, as I noted above (cf. Finke 1990). The abundance of cheap land at this time made exit a simple strategy. Finally, as the theory above predicts, the

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<sup>33</sup> Ahlstrom also observes that the Anglican establishment in Virginia was relatively weak, owing in part to the commercial impulse behind the settlement of the colony (2004: 184), although there were significant attempts to maintain some semblance of Anglican homogeneity, as when colonial leaders expelled the Catholic Lord Baltimore in 1643 and a group of Puritans in 1649 and banned Baptists in 1661 (2004: 192).

<sup>34</sup> Several states still engaged in taxpayer subsidization of favored denominations well into the 19th century. While this did not restrict a person from believing as they might, it did act as a disincentive to conversion. After all, who would want to pay a religious tithe twice?



plethora of denominations nationally (with no one single sect holding a majority) made it politically expedient to allow all to operate freely, especially when it came to drafting a federal constitution. Persecution of other denominations by one church would likely have invited retaliation and raised the possibility of costly economic or military conflict. Likewise, the smallest (and most expansionary) sects lobbied strongly for religious neutrality, since it was in their institutional interests. At this time, the most expansionary sects were the Methodists and Baptists (Finke and Stark 1992: 54–109). And as Leonard Levy notes, “Rhode Island ... never had an establishment of any kind, and as a stronghold of the Baptists, most vehemently opposed government aid to religion, state or federal” (1999: 83). Hanson (1998) also advances a thesis that is congruent with the opportunity costs approach to religion when he argues that a principal reason for the promotion of religious liberty was that the colonies owed it to the (Catholic) French for assisting them during the Revolutionary War.

The fact that not all states maintained the same degree of religious liberty provides an ample opportunity to test the above propositions more closely. The theory predicts that frontier states and states with the greatest need for foreign labor would be the first to deregulate the religious economy. More urban states (or urban areas, if one could carry the analysis to the city level) with denominations established during the colonial period would be the last ones to deregulate religion.

### *Latin America in the Nineteenth Century*

Latin America provides an interesting contrast to the United States. Latin America was dominated solely by Catholicism, whereas in the United States multiple sects were allowed to settle by the King of England’s decree (a question worthy of investigation in and of itself). Hence, the matter of negotiating among numerous competing religious groups was simply not an issue in Latin America as it was in the United States. Political competition did exist, however. Two factions vied fiercely for political power in highly unstable political and social situations: Liberals and Conservatives.<sup>35</sup> The former tended to favor urban commercial interests and were influenced by Enlightenment thinkers and the French Revolution. Conservatives, on the other hand, represented rural aristocratic interests and supposedly were suspicious of the new ideas emanating from Europe. Despite their different social bases, both parties found it in their material interests to push for export-oriented economic growth based on primary commodities. Typical histories of the 1800s recall how church policy was the

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<sup>35</sup> The wars of independence in Latin America were much more damaging economically than that in the United States, and the lack of autonomous political institutions during the colonial period meant that the region gained its independence in an institutional vacuum.

primary difference between these two political factions. Conservatives defended the interests of the Catholic Church against the Liberals, who sought to limit the power of the Catholic hierarchy. Not surprisingly, most of these accounts emphasize the ideological differences as the primary reason behind this divide (cf. Mecham 1966). Nonetheless, even Liberals advanced cautiously against the Catholic Church, realizing the economic and political power it could wield. One of the most famous liberals influenced by European thought, Simón Bolívar, saw the Church as an important political actor and granted it substantial privileges (Mecham 1966: 96). Given the tenuous political situation at the time and the social influence wielded by the Catholic Church, it is no wonder that Bolívar trod cautiously. Ideas gave way to the strategic interest of maintaining power.

Latin America obtained independence from Spain during the 1820s, the exact dates varying by country and region. For the next several decades, the Catholic Church maintained its dominant legal status despite being in a significantly weakened institutional position. Many bishops had fled during the wars of independence, and there was a significant struggle over who held the right to appoint replacements. Under the colonial regime, the Vatican had ceded this authority to the Spanish Crown (as part of a bargain giving the Vatican significant privileges in Spain as well as access to the New World). Once Spain gave up its territories, the Holy See considered this agreement (known as the *patronato*)<sup>36</sup> to be null and void. Hence, in the Vatican's view, the right of episcopal nomination returned directly to the Pope. The new colonial governments were less than willing to give up this important power, since new governors could appoint religious officials that bolstered their rule. Uncertainty over this matter meant that many diocesan sees remained vacant for years, sometimes decades. Without bishops, priests could not be ordained; thus the number of clergy dropped during this period (adding to the scarcity that resulted when many fled the Americas in the early 1800s, fearing reprisal for their support of the monarchy). In line with the theoretical expectations outlined above, it is not surprising that politicians sought to control the leadership of a powerful social institution by regulating the appointment of its leaders. The Church fought back in the only way it could: by essentially undertaking a personnel boycott.

Despite the controversy over the *patronato*, the Church retained the majority of its privileges during the early years of independence, including its vast landholdings, special judicial status, and monopoly over marriages, funerals, and the registry. Catholicism was widely declared the official religion of the new nations, and little effort was made to ease restrictions on Protestants.<sup>37</sup> It was only

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<sup>36</sup> The *patronato* was in fact a package of agreements, of which the appointment of bishops was the most contentious.

<sup>37</sup> One of the most interesting examples of this was the continued ban on the sale of Bibles to the general public. Given that Protestants prompt parishioners to read the Bible directly (as opposed to

in the 1850s that we witness movement against this privileged position. In part, the delay was due to incessant civil wars in many places; church-state policy simply never came up on the agenda when many national leaders lasted only months in office before being overthrown. Indeed, such political instability favored the bargaining power of the Church, and no leader sought to alienate it.<sup>38</sup> But during the middle part of the century, the Church faced a serious challenge when (primarily) Liberals expropriated Church lands and other financial assets and began, albeit slowly, to deregulate the religious market by making it legal for Protestants to practice their religion freely (though often with prohibitions on proselytizing). While this could be attributed to the ideological differences between Liberals and Conservatives, the latter rarely reversed these actions when they took power. Several factors related to the shifting opportunity costs of Liberals prompted this movement.

The most important factor in the expropriation of Church wealth related to the fiscal health of the state. Because the wars of independence left many national economies in shambles, national governments had to borrow abroad. Unfortunately, the inability to jump-start their economies led many governments to seek quick solutions to liquidity crises. The easiest way of raising revenue was simply to expropriate (often fallow) land from the Catholic Church, the largest landholder in the region. This land was sold to private interests, raising immediate cash.<sup>39</sup> Once that land was put to productive use, it was then taxed. Other revenue streams were also expropriated; for example, the secularization of marriage and funeral services provided a constant (albeit small) source of revenue for local governments. The national registry was also taken away from the Catholic Church, giving the state an important bookkeeping institution for the purposes of taxation. Opposition from Conservatives, who feared the taxation of land, was probably based more on this material interest than on a burning passion to please the Vatican. That Conservatives were not quick to yield these privileges back to the Church once they gained power indicates how interests could trump ideology; Conservative rulers benefited just as much from the expropriated Church wealth and functions as did Liberals. In all these instances, the opportunity cost of continued support for the Catholic Church was a major financial crisis and the possibility of invasion by Britain and France.<sup>40</sup>

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hearing it interpreted only through clerical mediation), the proliferation of Bibles to the laity was considered to be the first step toward a “Latin American Reformation.”

<sup>38</sup> An early attempt to limit the judicial powers of the Church in Mexico resulted in a revolt that replaced the executive in short order. See Gill (1999c: 767–768).

<sup>39</sup> This is not unlike the strategy surrounding privatization during the debt crisis of the 1980s, except that in the 1800s, the state essentially stole the assets that they then privatized.

<sup>40</sup> France did invade and occupy Mexico during the 1860s for failure to make good on outstanding loans.

The expropriation of Church property and social functions did not necessarily affect legislation guaranteeing religious freedoms. Indeed, it is entirely plausible that non-Catholic denominations could have been restricted from engaging in religious activities; the confiscation of Catholic Church property and laws pertaining to Protestants are not necessarily related. To weaken the Catholic Church and make resistance to such expropriations less effective, it would be reasonable to assume that Liberals would want to attract rival faiths to loosen the social stronghold the Church had over the population. However, this is unlikely for several reasons. First, the Catholic Church was already weakened by a substantial lack of clergy and bishops, many of whom had fled during the turmoil of independence and were not replaced. Second, the Catholic Church never commanded much authority over the majority of the population. Priests were largely absent from rural areas (except to minister to large plantation owners, who opposed the Liberals even without prompting from the Church). Even in cities, the clergy focused their attention on the wealthy, not on the popular classes (see Gill 1998, 1999b). The Catholic Church, with a few exceptions,<sup>41</sup> simply was not in a position to lead a mass revolt against any government.

Instead, the introduction of (weak) guarantees of religious freedom revolved around issues similar to those found in the United States. During the mid- to late 1800s, Latin America was seeking to expand its export markets to Northern Europe and the United States, as well as establishing commercial enterprises to receive manufactured imports from these countries. It made sense not to alienate potential trading partners by exposing them to religious persecution. As was noted above, these religious freedoms were more restrictive than those in the United States. Protestants were not allowed to seek converts in the region. They were even prohibited from importing copies of the Bible, as Bibles were to be only for the use of Catholic clergy, not the population at large (Gill 1998: 98)! Whereas in the United States, the presence of multiple denominations, some of which were aggressively evangelistic, made it necessary to allow churches to proselytize, in Latin America, religion in domestic politics revolved solely around the only game in town: the Catholic Church. Though the Church did not pose any significant risk of overturning a government, it made little sense to antagonize the hierarchy. Politicians could buy some good will by keeping Latin America exclusively Catholic, even though foreign Protestants were granted enclaves of religious liberty where they could worship as they chose. Eventually, enforcement of restrictions on proselytism waned, and Protestants began to make inroads, helped along by a major shift in evangelical missionizing away from a turbulent Asia and toward Latin America in the 1940s (Gill 1998: 82). In recent decades, the rise of competitive elections has given Protestant groups the political leverage to win

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<sup>41</sup> The revolts led by Padres Hidalgo and Morelos during Mexican independence are the exceptions.

further freedoms. Evangelical electoral support proved critical for Alberto Fujimori in the first round of the Peruvian presidential election of 1990. Although the Peruvian state still retains a concordat with the Vatican guaranteeing the Catholic Church “special status” in the country, various regulations on Protestant churches (e.g., building permits) have been eased. In Chile, a strong lobbying efforts and massive demonstration before the national legislature in Valparaiso resulted in a more favorable legal status for Protestant churches in 2000, granting them access to the chaplaincies in the military, prisons, and public hospitals.

Mexico<sup>42</sup> offers itself as an interesting case for examination in the Latin American context,<sup>43</sup> as it has experienced rather dramatic swings in church-state relations over the past 200 years. Mexico’s initial history mirrored that of other Latin American nations for most of the 19th century. Catholic clergy favoring the Crown during the war of independence fled, leaving the Church seriously understaffed for several decades. The administrative weakness of the Church during the mid-1800s was matched by political turmoil that left the nation with a weak central government. Conflict over who controlled the *patronato* largely went unresolved. Politically tenuous presidential administrations allowed the Vatican to choose bishops within the *geographic territory* of Mexico while simultaneously claiming the right of *patronato* in the legal name of the *sovereign state* of Mexico, a rhetorical exercise that left both parties satisfied. When Liberal politicians began consolidating their power in the second half of the 19th century (a period known as *La Reforma*), government officials expropriated a sizable portion of the Church’s landholdings and the clergy’s right to collect fees for sacraments (including marriage and funeral services). This came at a time when the central government was struggling to pay its foreign debt, and it allowed the government to raise cash quickly by selling off the land and taxing it, as well as allowing local governments to fund themselves through fees on civil marriage and burials. The nation’s borders also were opened to Protestantism in an attempt to weaken the social control the Catholic Church wielded over the population. This effort proved relatively fruitless given that foreign missionaries were more preoccupied with the non-Christian regions of the world, such as Asia.

A critical turning point in church-state relations came in 1917 amidst the decade-long Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). With Catholic bishops taking the side of the perceived counterrevolutionaries early in the struggle, the more radical authors of the 1917 Mexican Constitution sought to punish the Church by severely curtailing its legal and social status in the country. The Constitution

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<sup>42</sup> This passage draws on Gill (1999c).

<sup>43</sup> To reiterate, the purpose of this article is to lay out a detailed theory of why political actors choose to regulate (or deregulate) religious organizations. Admittedly, the empirical cases discussed here are meant to be “plausibility probes” of the theory in line with the use of analytic narratives, not a methodologically rigorous statistical test.

made the Catholic Church a legal nonentity, thereby prohibiting it from owning property and forbidding the clergy from any form of participation in political life, including holding office and voting. Church buildings were to be owned by the state. Moreover, the clergy were also restricted from wearing clerical garb or celebrating Mass in public. Though principally aimed at the Catholic Church, these restrictions applied to all denominations, thereby freezing the religious economy in place. Consistent, furthermore, with Propositions 4 and 5, though these restrictions were written into the 1917 Constitution, they were not enforced until 1926, when President Plutarco Elías Calles finally eliminated all his political rivals and consolidated the rule of a political apparatus that eventually would become the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Although a brief rebellion broke out in response to Calles' actions and the bishops engaged in a three-year religious "strike" in which Mass was not said in the country, the episcopacy eventually realized their weak bargaining position and accommodated themselves to this new regulatory regime.

Beginning in the 1930s, leaders of the Catholic Church strategized a means of ensuring that they could still operate their ministry under this harsh lack of religious liberty. The episcopacy endorsed President Lázaro Cárdenas' nationalization of the oil industry in 1938, which essentially led to a truce between church and state. As long as the clergy did not dissent on matters that were important to the dominant political party, they were allowed to minister in the state-owned churches (officially called museums) and operate as they would under more lenient regulations on religious freedom. This *modus vivendi* lasted through the 1980s. But as the state became increasingly weak, owing to decades of state intervention in the economy and growing political corruption, new political competitors began to arise, most notably the pro-Catholic National Action Party. Moreover, the strength of Catholic influence became apparent to political leaders when Pope John Paul II visited the country in 1979, filling the streets of Mexico City with millions of citizens despite very little publicity about the visit.

The next critical moment for church-state relations came with the presidential election of 1988. In that contest, Carlos Salinas barely beat his nearest rival, the son of former populist president Cuahtemoc Cárdenas. Many political observers believe that Salinas might actually have won the election only by resorting to massive fraud in the vote count. Nonetheless, it was quite apparent that the political hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party was nearing an end. Seeing this weakness, the papal nuncio began pushing aggressively for changes to the 1917 Constitution that would restore the Catholic Church's legal status and open the door for greater religious liberty. President Salinas yielded to these demands and in 1992 signed a set of constitutional reforms that substantially deregulated the religious marketplace. While the exact nature of these new

regulations ostensibly provided religious liberty for all denominations, the Catholic Church was the principal beneficiary (see Gill 1999c for full details). Legal registration requirements for religious organizations were to be determined by a denomination's "historical presence" in the country, which favored Catholicism and tended to exclude newer denominations (e.g., Pentecostals) that were frozen out of the religious marketplace by the 1917 restrictions. Nonetheless, government officials—as a way to check the social power of the Catholic Church and reward a rapidly growing constituency of evangelical Christians—has maintained a reasonably *laissez faire* policy toward the registration of religious groups (though legal harassment of non-Catholics has been reported in various localities).

What the Mexican case demonstrates is that the specific nature of religious regulation depends largely on the external political calculations of political leaders. When in a position of weakness, these leaders will tend to defer to the regulatory wishes of the hegemonic domination. However, when fiscal crises arise or when politicians are in a secure position of power, the wishes of secular leaders will predominate, and regulations that are put in place will be designed to bolster the political power and/or financial resources of those rulers. Regardless of whether ideas of religious liberty were popular at any given moment in time (as they were throughout Latin American liberal discourse in the 19th and 20th centuries), the determination to change religious regulations centers largely on the self-interest of the political actors who write those laws.

### *CONCLUSION*

Religious liberty is not something that comes about by mere historical necessity. It is a situation that results from the conscious actions of individuals operating under a variety of environmental constraints. How these constraints affect the incentives that politicians have for deregulating the religious market will play a major role in determining the degree and nature of religious freedom within a country. The theory presented above represents an initial cut at a general framework for understanding the origins of religious liberty. It remains sufficiently general with the intent of being applicable to different countries in different historical eras. It could be critiqued for being too general and hence vacuous. However, it does represent a major step in moving the field toward the study of individual action and away from metahistorical processes. The eventual utility of the theory will rest on its continued specification and ability to stand up to the scrutiny of empirical evidence. That will have to wait for the book to be written. Stay tuned.

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