

## **Towards a new religious narrative in the United States of America?**

Dr. Sergio García Magariño

- Instituto para el Conocimiento,  
la Gobernanza y el Desarrollo Globales (ICGD)
- CEDEU / Universidad Rey Juan Carlos
- Universidad Camilo José Cela
- Universidad Europea de Madrid

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*Abstract:*

American secularisation is considered an exceptional case in the Western world because of, on the one hand, the softer way it seems to have occurred in relation to other Western countries and, on the other, the fusion it seems to have been done among Judeo-Christian traditions into what is known as American civil religion.

The point proposed before is problematic and needs to be called into questions under the light of both the revisions made to the secularization theory by scholars such as Casanova through the interpretation of empirical data collected through the world about the religiosity of people and the multiple works made about the use of “sacred” language in American public life.

However, this paper takes those problematic dimensions for granted in order to deepened into what can be considered another secular human endeavour endowed with a religious spirit, namely: the spirit of Silicon Valley. This new secular-sacred narrative is not just American but is being exported as a narrative with “Messianic” traces that seems to aspire to embrace the whole world.

Thus, this article explores the origins and evolution of this narrative in the United States, on the one hand, and the expansion of what can be considered a “salvation” ideology abroad that country, on the other.

### **Introduction**

Secularisation is part of a great sociological theory which tried to explain the different social phenomena linked to the movement from traditional, urban societies to modern, urban ones. As Max Weber put it forward, as societies moved along that path of social change, citizen's loyalty towards traditional religious institutions progressively would progressively weaken (Estruch, 2015).

This descriptive theory, however, when the interdisciplinary area of development was created after Second World War, became a prescription to “modernize” countries, as it was

assumed that modernization would bring development and social progress automatically. Thus, secularisation moved from being a social process that seemed to have occurred in several countries —especially European—, to a desirable outcome to be foster through political and civil action.

The American case, though, was considered a special one within the Western world, as it was the first and most modern countries whereas its religious life was still very vibrant. Further, religious symbols, practices, narratives, references and collective rituals were introduced into the life of secular institutions such as laws, tribunals and National feasts (Bayon, 2016).

In order to explain the apparently exceptional phenomenon of American society in relation to its people's religiosity, the concept of American civil religion was devised. American civil religion was a kind of fusion among Jewish, Catholic and Protestant traditions into a non-sectarian spiritual tradition which generates social cohesion (Bellah, 1967).

Over the twenty first century, at least three social processes might have had an impact over American society that deserve careful attention and, perhaps, a revision of American civil religion theory: Important changes at the level of people's religiosity, a renewed and growing interest in religion and a new form of religious messianism linked to the expansion of the ideology underpinning Silicon Valley.

## 1. Forms of religiosity

It was explained that secularisation theory changed into a normative ideology. This process was taken for granted. Thus, important transformations at the level people's religiosity went unperceived. It is necessary to recognize that gathering international data about people's religiosity in order to identify patterns is not an easy task, so the problem was not only a neglection —as a result of taking secularisation for granted— but also methodological.

Even if agreeing on the same set questions to make surveys about peoples's religiosity throughout the world, what is meant by the word "religious" is quite different from one region to another (Casanova, 2009, p. 9). However, there are certain polls and surveys which seem to show a pattern. Given the complexity of the task at work, these perspectives should be taken as provisional.

For instance, Gallup polls in 1999 and 2005 indicates the over 65% of the people who replied to the questions "give God high importance" or consider themselves to be "religious people". The percentages vary among regions and countries. In Sub Saharan Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, the vast majority of people consider themselves religious. The same happens in our case, in the States, where most people, according to the poll, "give God high importance". However, the global trend seems to be descendant.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>

Pew Research Center offers a good glimpse of the trends too. Alike Gallup polls, Pew's analysis shows that the vast majority of people believe in God<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the total number of people who believe in God is constantly increasing, but probably as a result of the planet's increase in the total population.

When regions are taken into consideration, the situation slightly varies. The majority of people in Sub Saharan Africa, in South Asia, in the Middle East and in the United States consider themselves more religious than before while in the rest of the regions the trend is softly decreasing.

This estimates, though, are not definitive as it seems that, depending on the question asked, the responses could suggest other trends. However, it can be confidently said that religion is still present and plays an important role in the life of the masses. Nevertheless, the form might not be exactly the same as in the past. There are new religious groups, there are new forms of spirituality and traditional religions have evolved to incorporate new elements coming whether from spiritual or secular traditions (Díaz Salazar, 2006).

Thus, secularisation should not be taken for granted or, at least, naive notions of secularisation should be overcome in order to open the path for more sophisticated theories. As Casanova, Joan Estruck (1996) and other scholars of the theory of secularisation has posed, neither should be assumed that religion has turned into a private issue or a secularised set of sacred rituals: religion still has a collective imprints which aspires to contribute to face the challenges of current global modern society.

## 2. Renewed interest in religion

During the second half of the Twentieth Century, a materialist conception of existence had consolidated. This philosophy found expression in at least four visible spheres: historical materialism, capitalism, the development interdisciplinary area and postmodern consumerist society. However, the promises of these four trends, as the century came to the end, appeared unfulfilled.

First, the fall of the Soviet Union, together with the cruelties occurred during certain communist regimes which had been hidden for decades, reduced the appealingness of Communism and the confidence on the transformative utopia that it contained. Second, global liberal capitalism did not bring the prosperity and social justice that it was supposed to; on the contrary, it widened the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest. The unfulfilled forecast of Fukuyama in "The end of history" (1989) symbolizes this point.

Third, the exciting enterprise of development, whose explicit purpose was to eradicate poverty, but which departed from the same materialistic assumptions, did not fulfill its goals and was not even able to engender on those whom the projects had to serve the motivation to participate in them.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god/>

Finally, as a result of the loss of confidence both in the possibility to change the world and in the very rational capacity to make universal rational statements, postmodern thinking paved the path for the conclusion that the only feasible proposal was to forget those great social aspirations and to focus on trying to be happy by traveling, enjoying cultures and, ultimately, by consuming. Given the widespread depression, anxiety, general sense of dissatisfaction and mental problems within the most consumerist societies (Gonzalez, 2010, p. 3), it could be said that an existential vacuum seems to have pervaded many countries in the world.

Another world trend that has contributed to the crumbling of this “materialistic enterprise” described above, has been global integration. Economic globalisation is a process whose roots can be found some centuries ago but which has dramatically intensified over the last fifty years, mainly as a consequence of the upsurge of new technologies in the fields of communication and transport. However, economic capital is not the only thing that has been globalized. As Martin Albrow proposes in *The Global Age* (2012), all social processes, such as economy, culture, science, communications, technology, migration, threats, have become global except for politics.

Beyond the recognition that this globalisation is lacking global governance, what seems to be clear is that the movement of populations —with their cultural, religious, ethnic and social background— has putted into contact cultures, religions, values and practices which in the past were constrained to a very particular geographical setting. This forced “gathering” of peoples has normalized a phenomenon which used to be an exceptional event experienced by travelers: cultural clash.

In sum, global integration and the breaking of the “materialistic enterprise” have stimulated a new search and interest in religion or at least in transcendent and “spiritual issues”. Some indicators of this renewed interest are the number of publications, undergraduate and graduate studies in “religious sciences” that appeared over the twenty first century; the upsurge of many conflicts connected to religion; the concern with Islam and more particularly with political Islam; the proliferation of practices such as travels to India to visit certain “gurus”; the emergence of aborigens rituals and group “experiences” in Western countries where ceremonies are held; the use of drugs in search for “spiritual experiences”, the renewal of the Interfaith international movement; the connection between politics and religion in different countries; the expansion of fundamentalisms of different kinds in different regions; the appearance of new political movements in Europe which either have religious foundation or use slogans against specific religious groups their hallmark; the enhancement of awareness at the level of public institutions on the potential conflict of religious and cultural clashes when diversity is not correctly managed; to name a few.

What is equally surprising is that the traditional channels of this transcendent impulses — organisational religion— are not being used. Moreover, new narratives, apparently secular but which contain features of the “sacred ones”, such as the one that is going to be analysed in the following point are being multiplied. In other words, the new search for meaning and spiritual, the new interest in religion, is not being channelized by the institutions that traditionally have been the focal point of this impulse towards transcendence. Some authors, such as Juan José Tamayo, interpret this new trend as a sign of democratisation: spirituality is not the monopoly of religion anymore (2011). Others consider that this is a distortion of the

spirit of religion and the consequence of religions not taking into account the requirements of the modern world.

### 3. Silicon Valley's new messianism

United States of America was founded upon ideas which combined political and religious references, as it was exposed above. America was interpreted by some as the New Jerusalem, the Promised Land, the region of opportunities... (Bayón, 2018). Mason logias played an important role in the construction of this sacred notion of National identity (Ferguson, 2019).

This self image of a kind of modern chosen people, was reinforced by the economic growth that the States experienced during the twentieth century, by its victory in Second World War and, finally, by the leading global role it assumed after the fall of Soviet Communism. Nevertheless, the terrorist attacks of September 11 apparently changed the collective psychological atmosphere. The new era, the end of the history of conflicts narrative was replaced by another one, linked to the awareness of multiple threats and vulnerabilities which resembles another religious narrative: the Apocalipsis. In other words, climate change, Jihadist threat, migration, new world conflicts, mass destruction weapons, economic crisis, identity clashes, passing diseases came to the front of consciousness opening the path for and generating the right atmosphere for the upsurge of messianic movements and new narratives of salvation. In the next paragraphs it will be proposed that what can be named as the "Spirit of Silicon Valley" is one of this movements.

Silicon Valley is a specific warm region in San Francisco that embodies economic, industrial and economic success. It gathers over six thousand Tech companies, some of which are international symbols: Apple, Google, Cisco, Facebook, Netflix, Oracle, Tesla, Instagram, Twitter, Intel... (Sadin, 2019). San Francisco also hosts the most American important digital research labs, two of the most prestigious universities in the world (Berkeley and Stanford), has cultivated very selective immigration policies to bring "brains" from China and India and, finally, it has become a very appealing destiny for people from every corner of the world who want to live the "American dream".

The war of Vietnam, the economic crisis of 1973, the failure of Donald Reagan attempt to make "America great again" weakened the promise of the States as the land for salvation. However, the territory for the promise, the new Jerusalem, seemed to focused in a more narrow space: San Francisco. The history of San Francisco is full of pioneering anecdotes. It was the golden land in the nineteenth Century, and so the name of its famous bridge: The Golden Gate. It was the center of the counter cultural movements in the sixties. In the seventies, San Francisco represented the place were American traditional values and norms had to be called into question. The campus of Berkeley gathered youth who wanted to make their life free from the constraints of American political and cultural rules. Songs, movies, books reflect these ideas, especially in reference to California. The "Flower power", "Summer of love" movements which dreamed with changing the world, establishing peace, the emancipation of human beings from the fetters of oppression emerged in that region.

The “Spirit of Silicon Valley”, though, is something different from this past that San Francisco has. These movements which bore transformative utopias did not succeed completely. They achieved certain social victories, such as the widening of political and civil rights, but their revolutionary potential was dismantled by another logic: pragmatic libertarianism (Grames, 2011). This logic is an economic logic embedded into a grand narrative that makes it difficult to identify its main goal: to make infinite money through the creation of Tech Start Ups that explode the generation of data and artificial intelligence (Sadin, 2018, p. 25). The narrative, on the contrary, highlights the possibility to accompany our life through artefacts that are guided by algorithms which offer, in every single moment, the best world possible. In addition, this economic model which aspires to conquer every market, every sphere of human activity, has broken the natural limits of our previous economic systems. For instance, there are infinite options to generate data; there is no need for time —everything can be instantaneous—; there is no space —data can penetrate everything, even dreams—; there are not physical limitations —just energy and siliceous. The greatest hopes of liberalisms are fulfilled in the *tecnoliberalist* claims.

This trend would not be considered a new messianism if the aspiration remained circumscribed to a territory. By the “Spirit of Silicon Valley”, Eric Sadin —who coined the term— referred to a project to expand the model —including its philosophy— throughout the world. This kind of digital colonisation of the world would be the essence of that spirit which resembles the messianic movements that aim to save humanity. The difference is that in this occasion humanity is expected to be saved via machines that interpret data and guide our actions. Therefore, this movement might be dangerous because, as it expands, free will contracts.

Economy, technology and politics seem to have established an alliance to spread the economic model and its underlying ideas out in the world. There is a huge system of propaganda —proselytism— which is showing very effective to set in city after city of the five continents small “Silicon Valleys”. A network of Universities, a system of top conferences — Ted Talks—, exalt the bounties of technological parks, defend the need for start ups and the intelligent policies that get to generate the conditions for company incubators. The priests are those youth who became extremely wealthy and explain their story mixing keys for economic success with slogans about how an App can change the world. Whether in Berlin and Santiago de Chile, in Haifa or in Lagos, in Dubai or Bangalore, many Silicons are emerging in the five continents.

The purpose of this analysis is not to assess the danger inherent to this model —especially concerning the alluded capacity of decision of human beings—, neither to judge whether the narrative is just a mask to hide deeper intentions —to be mil millionaire at any cost— but to uncover the sacred and quasi religious dimension with which it is endowed.

The American television sitcom *Silicon Valley* shows that the cliché “we want to make the world a better place” is prevalent and omnipresent in the work of the youth who run start ups. The almost religious philosophy of happiness and salvation of the “Silicon Spirit” is that through technology, and in particular through digital technologies and data processing, the world could progress indefinitely. Although the collective and communitarian dimensions of this might be present in the movements of San Francisco of the past, current trend is quite



individualistic. This matches with the protestant tradition upon which the American nation was built upon. Individuals taking initiative to prosper and to assist their fellow citizens. Thus, the role of the government would be to create the conditions out of which the start ups system could grow. This is the sort of triple marriage which indicated previously. Although apparently innocent, the risk appears when the proposal to attain progress and happiness is considered as the only way to attain progress and happiness.

## Conclusions

Religion narratives have not disappear in modern societies. Religion seems to be a permanent feature of humanity's individual and collective life, and plays an important role in social processes. The predictions of extreme secularist theories were not fulfilled. Thus, secularisation is being revisited to attain a deeper understanding of its dynamics. In addition, learning to manage religious diversity is a crucial point to strengthen social cohesion.

The consolidated materialistic worldview of the twentieth century, as a result of global integration and the problems related to communism, liberal capitalism, development practice and consumerism, have opened the path for a new search for meaning and spirituality and for a renewed interest in religion during the twenty first century. However, this search is not being channelled through the traditional means out of which spirituality found expression.

United States, one of the first modern countries, followed a particular path in what the relation of religion and public sphere is concerned. The notion of civil religion was coined to describe this symbiotic relation.

In the last decades, a new quasi religion narrative grew in the States, especially in a particular region: San Francisco. This narrative has been characterized as the "Spirit of Silicon Valley". Sacred references; an extreme trust on the relation between economic prosperity, happiness and technology; ambition; a desire to save the world and to make it a better place; technological innovation; and government complacence; have all combined to engender a new global project which is trying to colonize both the whole world and every sphere of social and individual life.

The generation of data and artificial intelligence are the driving forces of a limitless tecno liberal enterprise which threatens human range of action by the ever evolving robotic capacity to suggest "the best option" for each person in every moment. However, the appealingness of the narrative and the apparent nobility of its aspiration makes it difficult to uncover the underlying desire to make money at any cost.

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