

# Religion as Trust in Authority: Theocracy and Ecology in the United States

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Far from being a universal feature of culture, the concept of religion has distinctly western origins. What, then, is religion, and how shall it be empirically studied? I suggest, as one of many possible alternatives, an etymologically-based approach to religion, understood as trust in sources of epistemic and moral authority. Four authorities are considered, including institutional religion, science, nature, and the state. I present results of a survey-based empirical inquiry of U.S. adults, enriched by means of follow-up interviews exploring their trust or distrust in these domains of authority. Based on this inquiry, two hybrid forms are at the forefront of religious debate among Americans: *theocracy*, a linking of trust in institutional religion and government, and *ecology*, a combined trust in nature and science. These results are regionally variable in the United States, and cross-national data clarify the exceptionalist position of the United States with respect to European countries. Trust in authority emerges as a fruitful means to link seemingly disparate realms of social life, and offers an important basis for geographic comparison. Yet whether understood broadly as trust in authority or along other lines, the geography of religion will benefit from greater theoretical precision and methodological pluralism as suggested in this study. *Key Words:* *authority, nature, religion, science, state, trust.*

Is religion some sort of cultural natural kind? A classic example of a natural kind is water, whose myriad forms—liquid water, ice, steam, the dozens of varieties of snow supposedly known to the Inuit—all illustrate some real underlying essence, what we know as H<sub>2</sub>O.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in labeling the diverse religious preferences of the inhabited planet, the common geography textbook map of world religions implies that there is an underlying essence to religion and that all these specific instances illustrate not only the ubiquity of religion but its necessity. Religion becomes, like language, a universal ingredient of culture.

Thinking of religion as the sum of, or what lies behind, the many religions we find in the world today is convenient, but it is belied by a preponderance of scholarly opinion, as demonstrated in Adrian Ivakhiv's article (presented earlier in this Forum section). To quote one of many arguments in this vein: "Just like the notion itself, the most general questions concerning religion, its nature and definition, its origins or expressions, were born in the West. From there, they were transferred, much later and at the cost of daring generalizations, to all other cultures, however remotely prehistoric or exotic" (Dubuisson 2003, 9).

Yet, implications for the geography of religion are profound. If indeed the concept of "religion" and its cognate terms ("the sacred," "spirituality," etc.) arise out of a particular European context prior to their conceptual export to all corners of the earth, what basis remains for mapping patterns, for drawing comparisons across space and place? We may retain the ability to study how "religion" and "the sacred" are understood and practiced in specific geographic locales, but we will have to remove that map of world religions from our wall, and it will remain blank.

## Religion and Authority

In a review of existing definitions of religion, Peter Beyer agrees with the foregoing analysis that religion should be understood not as some natural-kind object to be appropriately bounded but, rather, as a plural construction serving multiple scholarly, popular, and institutional intentions (Beyer 2003). Yet Beyer suggests that we needn't discard the concept of religion simply because it is constructed. And so here I propose one possible approach to religion that could be used as a basis for comparative geographical study. It will prove to be

unorthodox, yet it follows from an etymological thread as well as contemporary scholarship. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes “doubtful etymology” for religion, but includes the Latin word *religare*, to bind. This Latin root links religion with the common words *ligament*, a binding tissue, and *rely*, which the OED defines as “to depend on with full trust.” The etymological root thus suggests a functional sense of religion as that which ultimately binds together one’s life, and a processual sense of religion as built upon relations of trust.

The literature on trust is immense: in a Durkheimian sense, trust is the very fabric upon which social relations are founded, so it is a predictably huge topic. As one contemporary example, Niklas Luhmann, argues, it is an inescapable feature of modern life given modernity’s complexity and related risk, necessitating trust for one to act (Luhmann 1979; cf. Beck 1992). Anthony Giddens (1990) builds on the work of Luhmann and others in his commentary on trust in modernity by distinguishing between “facework” and “faceless” commitments, the former involving personal relations of trust and the latter, developmentally founded on the former, involving trusting relations with abstract entities.

I would like to focus on the latter category of trust in abstract entities or systems, for which Giddens mentions the important ingredient of perceived expertise or authority. Though authority takes involuntary forms where mere obedience is expected (e.g., trust in legal and political institutions), trust is a necessary component of voluntary forms of authority, such as that deemed worthy to provide epistemic or moral guidance.

Thinking of religion in the broader sense of trust in authority is especially helpful because of the politically and personally authoritative role played by institutions of Western religion. Indeed, a fruitful area of recent scholarship concerns religion’s transformations in late modernity as a result of changing relations between individuals and authority. Following an argument known as detraditionalization, late modernity has witnessed a general shift of authority from “without” to “within,” from external institutions to personal intuition (Heelas 1996). This premise is used by Thomas Luckmann to note two important, linked trends affecting contemporary religion, one favoring a “shrinking of transcendence” in which otherworldly authorities are replaced by this-worldly sources of larger meaning (e.g., those based on national or racial identity), and the second placing greater emphasis on the self in “minimal transcendences” such as self-fulfillment and the development of a new privatized social form of religion (Luckmann 2003).

Yet modernity’s impulse concerning authority is divided; as Adam Seligman argues, “Modernity . . . is in-

herently hostile to the idea and experience of authority and as a result has difficulty understanding its persistence” (Seligman 2000, 3). Indeed, for each spiritual movement affirming Luckmann’s argument for the personalization of religion, there is a resurgent movement, in evidence, for example, among American evangelicals, effectively reestablishing the institution of religion as a domain of epistemic and moral authority.

So far, I have outlined an argument for considering religion as trust in authority. But this argument applies not only to institutions of religion but also to a fuller spectrum of sources of epistemic and moral authority. This spectrum is arguably broad. Here I will restrict myself to four domains of authority, each with a particular historical and institutional embeddedness in Western societies: science, organized religion, nature, and the state. These domains are internally complex and different from one another. Science and religion are commonly recognized as important institutions of epistemic and moral authority, respectively, whereas nature is less an institution than an abstract category of authority, and the state is primarily understood as a political authority but its epistemic and moral power can be considerable. Yet they are all similar in that their overlapping social authority is commonly recognized, for instance, in appeals to normative guidance by science as a body of epistemic expertise, to the deities, traditions, and sacred texts of organized religions as ultimate truth, to nature as a deep source of moral wisdom, and to the epistemic and moral pronouncements of the state.

The religious dimensions of these three additional domains have already been pointed out by others. Science is widely understood as an important epistemic authority but our trust in science may be more akin to religious trust than is usually acknowledged (Midgley 1992; Appleyard 1993). Connections between nature and religion in Western societies are important but ambiguous, reaching back to the differing traditions of natural law and naturalism (Glacken 1967); and nature religion has been identified as an important and longstanding American phenomenon (Albanese 1990, 2002). Robert Bellah is generally credited with the term “civil religion,” a veneration of state and national identity that implies a trust in government not simply as a political power, but for larger epistemic and moral matters as well (Bellah 1975).

How shall we map religion as trust in authority and what comparisons emerge across space and place? These questions necessitate a shift from the theoretical to the empirical; they are often answered by means of spatially extensive approaches such as survey analysis. Let us, then, consider an empirical application of this concept of

religion, using the contemporary case of the United States.

## Trust in God, Government, Nature, and Science in the United States

The research discussed here involved a telephone-based sample survey of 1,013 adult Americans conducted during the spring and summer of 2002, with roughly one hundred extended follow-up interviews. Participating adults were screened to obtain a sex, age, and regional balance representative of the U.S. population. This plural, quantitative/qualitative methodology provides statistically representative results coupled with interpretive understanding of these results. Yet can broad issues of trust in authority be studied via telephone surveys? One favorable indication was the high level of interest among respondents: roughly two-thirds requested further information on the project and expressed willingness to be contacted for follow-up interviews. Indeed, trust in authority—especially religion and the state—was a major issue on the minds of Americans during this period. Following the disputed presidential election in late 2000, the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, and the Bush administration's subsequent military operations in Afghanistan and (then) threats of operations in Iraq—many of which were publicly justified in religious as well as political terms—the U.S. state increasingly portrayed itself as a guardian of the true and the right, and not just as a political authority. The connection between state and religion also arose in debates surrounding the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in June 2002 challenging the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance; and debate over the authority of religion was intense as well, with sex scandals challenging the U.S. Catholic Church. We found that many of our respondents were starting to doubt whom they could trust as a result of these events, though public expression of doubt—especially with respect to the state—was still guarded.

The survey included multiple means of assessing trust in the four chosen domains. To aid participant understanding, wording typically included the human face of each domain; thus we referred to “scientific knowledge and the views of scientists,” “insights gained from religion, including the views of religious leaders,” “the views of our country's political leaders,” and “lessons learned from nature, including the views of environmentalists.” As revealed in the follow-up interviews, some respondents maintained a trust in abstract authority while revealing distrust in related human authorities (e.g., God

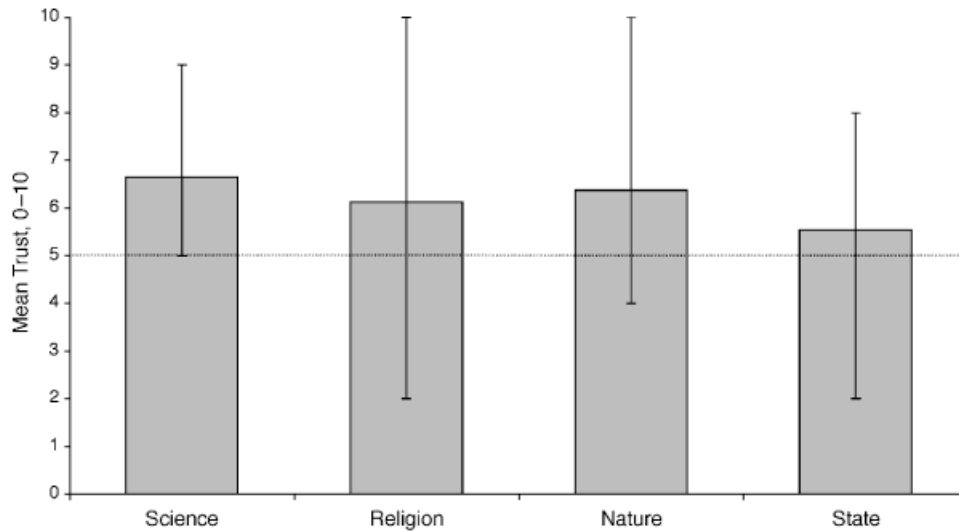
versus the church, or nature versus environmentalists), but for the most part there was not a strong difference.

We queried respondents' concern regarding twelve categories of policy issues, and for each with high stated concern the respondents also rated these four domains as authoritative sources of information or guidance with respect to that policy issue. Following these more specific instances, we asked respondents to summarize their overall trust in each domain. We also included questions that explored the possibility of what could be called “hypertrust,” an extreme or exclusive trust in that authority. Respondents were asked general background questions, and questions connected with each domain (e.g., participation in religious services, or training in science). Responses were on a scale of 0 to 10, with 5 provided as a midpoint.

In addition to routine statistical procedures, we performed multivariate factor analysis on items relevant to the four domains of authority using varimax rotation of factors extracted via principal components analysis.<sup>2</sup> Factor analysis is used in the behavioral sciences as a method of identifying common themes or factors that presumably summarize a number of attitudinal variables. It has been criticized for its tendency to reduce highly complex phenomena to one or two reified, ostensibly underlying “factors” (Gould 1981); yet we achieved qualitative interpretation of our statistical factors by interviews with respondents scoring in the top and bottom quintiles. Varimax rotation is the usual procedure: it assumes that factors are orthogonal (i.e., independent of each other). This assumption was generally upheld when varimax results were compared with those obtained by oblique (direct oblimin) rotation.

Selected general results are presented in Figures 1 and 2, with the midpoint labeled. Also labeled are bars representing 10 percent and 90 percent quantiles to indicate the range of responses. Mean trust (Figure 1) was roughly similar in all four domains of authority, yet the 10 percent and 90 percent quantiles suggest distinct distributions for each; for instance, trust in science ranged from 5 to 9 whereas trust in religion ranged from 2 to 10. Overall, religion was the most contentious of the four domains of authority, evoking both strong trust and strong distrust.

Figure 2 displays the results of selected hypertrust statements. Since the statements themselves are not equivalent, the means cannot be directly compared; yet in general, far less overall support was found for hypertrust in science and the state than for religion and nature. Predictably, the distribution of responses as suggested in the 10 percent and 90 percent quantiles was high for each hypertrust statement, though greater var-



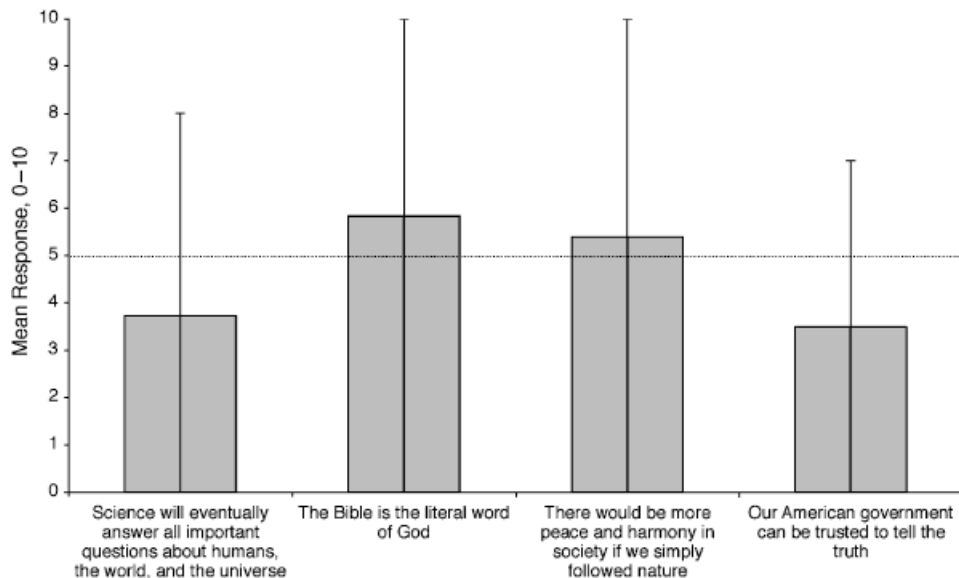
**Figure 1.** Mean level of trust among U.S. adults in four domains of authority, with error bars representing 10 percent and 90 percent quantiles.

iability is evident in some domains (e.g., religion and nature) than others (e.g., the state).

Factor analysis of sixteen statements related to trust in authority resulted in preliminary identification of four factors, of which the first two were retained following in-depth interviews confirming their meaningful (vs. merely statistical) basis. Constraining the analysis to two factors then produced the results of Table 1, which presents the strongest variable loadings for each factor in decreasing order. High positive variable loadings represent high positive association with a factor; negligible associations are indicated with a dash. Factor 1 explains 22 percent of variance among the sixteen variables; the highest variable loadings pertain to trust in religion and trust in state. Factor 2 explains 18 percent of the variance, with trust in nature and trust in science loading strongly.

Given the amount of variance these factors explain, both suggest strong *distrust* as well as trust in their respective domains of authority.

Follow-up interviews help clarify these pairings between trust in religion and state, and trust in nature and science. For instance, a sixty-one-year-old, well-educated woman from Alabama who scored in the top quintile for factor 1 stated: “I was raised to trust in God and I do, and again I think that our government is better than anywhere else that we could be and I would like to think that people are trying to do right.” Another respondent, a fifty-six-year-old female from Michigan who scored in the bottom quintile, said: “I think [the linkage between religion and state] is accurate insofar as government and religion are hierarchies. . . . They are not truth-tellers. They are at times, but they are not



**Figure 2.** Mean response to selected hypertrust statements, with error bars representing 10 percent and 90 percent quantiles.

**Table 1.** Factor analysis: Variable loadings<sup>a</sup>

Factor	1	2
	Trust in religion and state	Trust in nature and science
Variance explained	22.1%	17.9%
General trust in religion	0.787	—
Issue-specific trust in religion (average)	0.748	—
Belief in the Bible as the Word of God	0.731	−0.234
General trust in state	0.709	0.227
Issue-specific trust in state (average)	0.646	0.189
Belief in the existence of God	0.624	−0.244
U.S. a world leader for peace, freedom, and democracy	0.542	—
U.S. government tells the truth	0.412	—
Issue-specific trust in nature	—	0.745
General trust in nature	0.101	0.723
Issue-specific trust in science (average)	—	0.707
General trust in science	—	0.660
Science will eventually answer all questions	−0.105	0.511
More peace and harmony if we follow nature	—	0.501

<sup>a</sup> Factor extraction: principal components analysis. Rotation: varimax (Kaiser Normalization). Factor loadings under 0.1 omitted.

purveyors of truth as much as they are formers of opinion and modifiers of behavior.” For factor 2, a sixty-year-old male from Washington state who scored in the top quintile said, “Well, I mean science brings us the truth, as best as they can, and nature is the truth, and we need both to have a balanced way. To survive.” Yet a wealthy forty-four-year-old male from Pennsylvania, who scored in the bottom quintile, said “Science doesn’t necessarily have all the answers, although they may think so. . . . I trust nature in the fact that nature’s here and it’s been provided by God, but I don’t trust that for my source of being.”

Some interpretation is required to make sense of these and similar responses. For factor 1, the official U.S. doctrine of disestablishment tended to dissuade high-trust respondents from drawing an explicit connection between church and state, though those who distrusted church and state were freer to state what they felt was a problematic connection between these domains. In contrast, high-trust respondents for factor 2 were quick to cite science as an authoritative epistemological voice on nature, whereas high-distrust respondents not only questioned science’s authoritative voice but the authoritative relevance of nature to their lives. Important

asymmetries thus emerge via interviews, whereby trust and distrust are conceived and expressed somewhat differently. These asymmetries could not have been identified via factor analysis alone, yet factor analysis was successful in identifying the larger, extensive patterns of trust and distrust in authority.

I will use the terms *theocracy* and *ecology*, respectively, for these paired forms of trust evidenced in factor analysis and elaborated in interviews. Theocracy here implies not support for divine or priestly rule but the increasingly visible role of religion in the discourse and substance of American politics; ecology implies, in its Arcadian sense (Worster 1977), science-based advocacy for nature. There is an important structural symmetry between theocracy and ecology in that both join an ultimate authority and a mediating human institution: thus, the state mediates the epistemic and moral authority of God, and science mediates the epistemic and moral authority of nature, with some indication that people place primary trust on the ultimate—ostensibly nonhuman—authority. There is generally understood to be a historical antagonism between ecology and theocracy as naturalistic versus supernaturalistic schemes of authority; but this conflict thesis ignores many of the complex interactions between the domains of religion and science in time and space (Brooke and Cantor 1998; Livingstone and Withers 1999). Indeed, the structural alliances of authority discovered in this empirical research owe everything to a particular history and geography running from the Enlightenment to environmentalism to the current Bush presidency. Given this context, theocracy and ecology should be understood as two primary realms of contemporary contestation over authority among Americans—two primary expressions of a fractured American religious landscape.

Interview results shed further light on this fractured American religious landscape. Toward the end of our interviews we asked respondents whether they thought trust and/or distrust can go too far. Their responses often indicated a perceived distinction between self and others, whereby noted problems (e.g., Jim Jones-style religious cults or exclusive trust in science) were explicitly attributed to other people, not themselves. Yet, when asked whether they personally struggled in deciding whether to trust such authorities, many more respondents were willing to admit their ambivalence, even with respect to the authorities they trusted the most. In short, our interviews suggest that Americans are aware of how differences in trust and distrust in authority have created differences among themselves, but they may be less aware that many Americans—whether pro- or anti-theocracy or ecology—are, as individuals, internally

divided as well. In at least this respect, Americans may be more alike than they seem.

### Regional and Cross-National Comparison

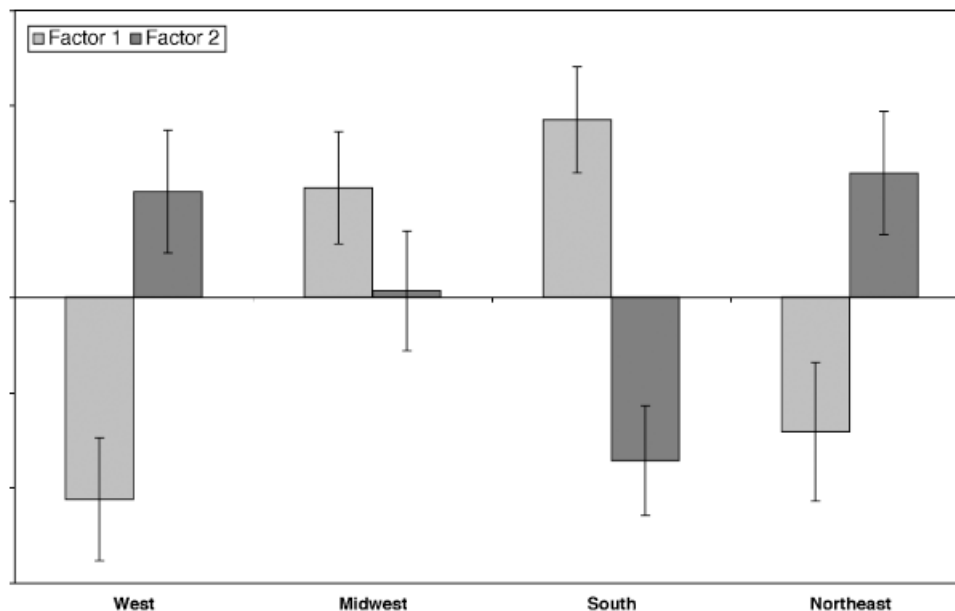
Is this fractured American landscape of trust in authority evident across regions, as suggested in the popularized “red” and “blue” zones of the 2004 presidential election? Figure 3 aggregates factor analysis results into four general U.S. regions, determined by preliminary inspection of nine standard U.S. regions. Though factor analysis units are not meaningful, the overall mean is 0; therefore, results above and below the axis demonstrate regional patterns relative to the United States as a whole. The results reveal some differences across regions and suggest a negative correlation between theocracy and ecology at the regional scale. The South, consisting of south Atlantic and east and west south-central states, bears on average the greatest support for theocracy and opposition to ecology, whereas the West, consisting of mountain and Pacific states, has the strongest opposition to theocracy and moderate support for ecology, similar to the Northeast, consisting of New England and the mid-Atlantic states. The results for theocracy are broadly similar to those from other regional studies of U.S. religiosity (Zelinsky 1961; Shortridge 1976; Tweedie 1978), yet slightly different from studies of civil religion (Stump 1985). Though few published studies reveal U.S. spatial patterns of environmentalism or trust in science, results for ecology are unsurprising in suggesting that the strongest support is found on the east and west coasts.

More in-depth geographical research would reveal how theocracy and ecology arise and are reproduced in

place-specific contexts; the empirically observed conflict noted in our results is not as inevitable as it is commonly viewed. Yet the regional results should be interpreted with the same caution as the generalized maps of “red” and “blue” states publicized during the 2004 presidential election. The very fact that U.S. regions had to be aggregated into only four groups to generate statistically meaningful results suggests the diversity of response within regions.

A striking set of disparities emerges in the cross-national context. Though not directly comparable to the data discussed above, data from the 1998 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Religion II module offer some context for American theocracy. Figure 4 plots unweighted mean responses to confidence in government and religious organizations for twenty-four countries.<sup>3</sup> Relative to these comparison countries, many of which are located in Europe, the United States scores relatively high in confidence in government, and very high in confidence in religious organizations. More direct comparison comes from mean responses to the Religion II statement, “My country would be a better country if religion had less influence”<sup>4</sup>: of 24 mean responses, the United States ranks twenty-first, much lower than Northern Ireland and Israel, with only Hungary and Bulgaria showing stronger support for more religion in government.

Regarding ecology, some indication can be gained from the 2000 ISSP Environment II module, which included a variable on trust in science to solve environmental problems, and a variable on what could be considered a form of deep trust in nature as inherently spiritual or sacred.<sup>5</sup> A plot of these results (Figure 5)



**Figure 3.** Mean factor analysis scores by region, with error bars representing one standard error above and below the mean.

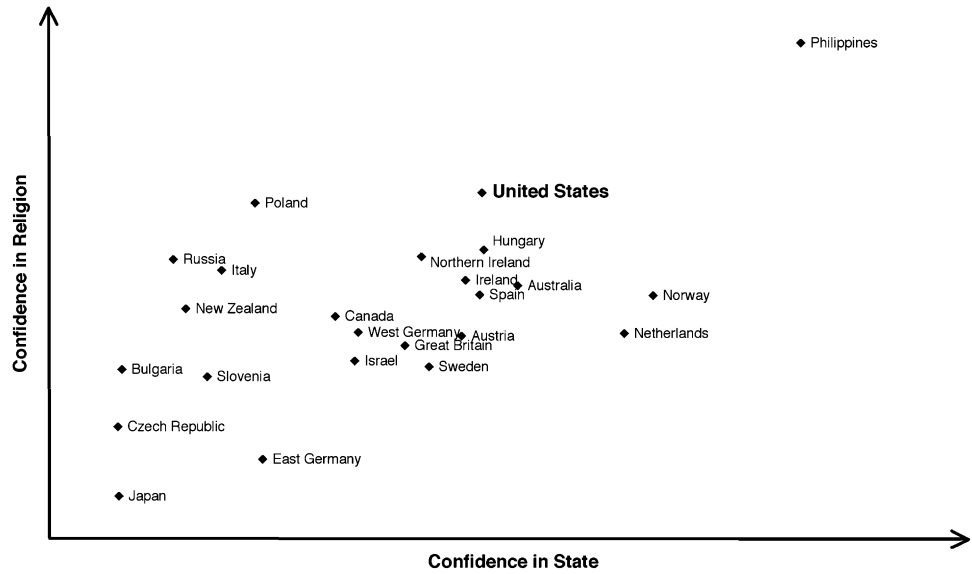


Figure 4. 1998 International Social Survey Programme Religion II module results.

suggests that the United States scores relatively high in trust in science relative to other (largely European) countries; yet, interestingly, many countries score higher than the United States in terms of deep trust in nature. Though theocracy thus seems stronger in the United States than many European countries, ecology appears to be of equivalent or greater strength elsewhere.

These preliminary cross-national results shed light on what is known as U.S. religious exceptionalism (Zelinsky 2001) vis-à-vis Europe, which has generated considerable heat in the debate over the extent of secularization in these countries (Stark 1999; Bruce 2001, 2002). Given the higher U.S. trust in religion, government, and science implied in the ISSP results, perhaps what is ex-

ceptional about the United States relative to Europe is not the strength of organized religion per se, but rather a more diffuse phenomenon of trust in authority. Yet scale matters: important differences among individual Americans, and generalized differences in American regions, enrich rather than discount these highly significant differences with non-Americans.

### Rethinking Religion: Theory and Methodology

Religion in the broad sense defined here as trust in authority thus appears stronger in the United States

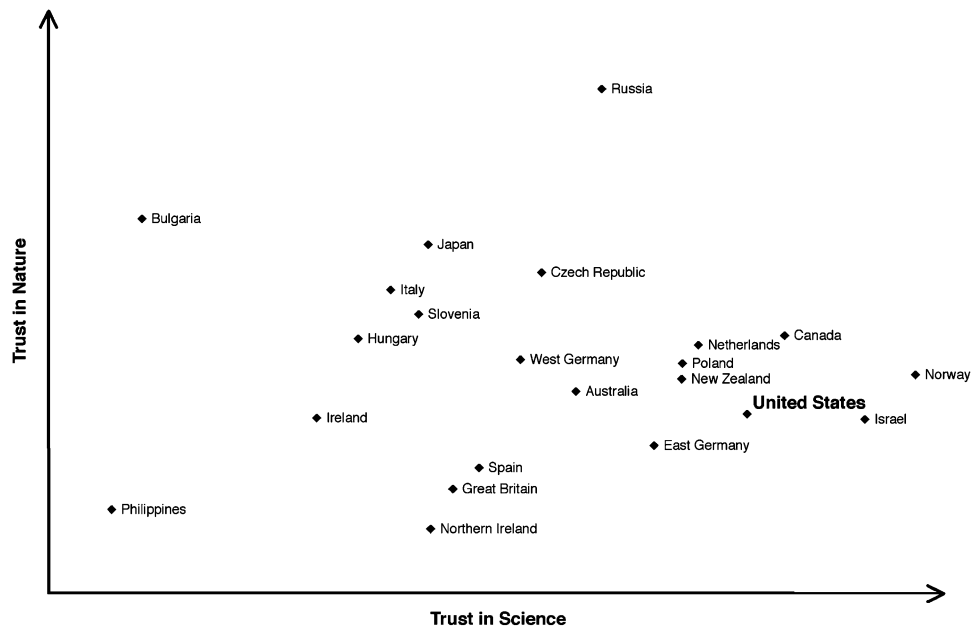


Figure 5. 2000 International Social Survey Programme Environment II module results.

than among many of its European counterparts. Within the United States it is to some extent regionally specific, with both relatively strong support and opposition to the two predominant forms of trust in authority described here as theocracy and ecology. These results are largely quantitative and nationally representative, with some qualitative interpretation obtained via follow-up interviews; yet much greater depth in current patterns of trust in authority would be obtained from focused qualitative studies, which would also highlight the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in trust in late modernity.

What do these results tell us about religion and the geographic study of religion? First, institutional religion is inextricably bound up with relations of trust in authority, and thus is functionally similar to regimes rarely understood as religious. We should therefore be cautious in bounding the domain of religion too narrowly. Yet the results also suggest that careful conceptual bounding of religion can afford the sort of "big-picture" comparative geographical view evident in maps of world religions. Ultimately, whether defined as trust in authority or approached from any of a number of alternative points of departure, the geography of religion would profit immensely from the application of both extensive and intensive research methodologies at a variety of scales, local to global. This plural methodological approach must be joined with greater theoretical scrutiny of the object of analysis, leading to carefully demarcated research along conceptual and empirical axes. Geographers have a great deal to contribute, but only if we take seriously the complexity as well as the significance of religion as we create new maps to replace the old.

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## Notes

1. For a much fuller account of natural kinds, see Putnam (1975).
2. Two methods for factor retention were employed: all factors were retained with eigenvalues (representing the amount of explained variance) greater than 1, and/or those that preceded an abrupt change in slope on an ordered eigenvalue scree plot (Cattell 1978; Kim and Mueller 1978).
3. The Religion II module is stored in the University of Cologne's Central Archive for Empirical Social Research as

ZA3190 ([www.gesis.org/ZA](http://www.gesis.org/ZA)); variables V20 and V22 were included in this analysis.

4. Religion II variable V31.

5. The Environment II module is stored in the University of Cologne's Central Archive for Empirical Social Research as ZA3440 ([www.gesis.org/ZA](http://www.gesis.org/ZA)); variables V10 and V18 were included in this analysis.

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