

Reply to Rodney Stark

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In *The Lariat* online (www.baylor.edu/lariat/news.pho?action=story&story=55973) and *Christianpost* (<http://christianpost.com/Society/General/2009/02/humanist-group-claims-baylor-religion-survey-flawed-04/page2.html>) Rodney Stark has replied to my report “Is the Baylor Religion Study Reliable?” (<http://www.secularhumanism.org/greg-paul-baylor.pdf>) challenging the validity of the BRS program in which he is a leading participant. Although brief, his defense includes information and claims that are sufficiently misleading – not to say accidentally revealing -- to warrant a response. At the same time they, shall we say, starkly confirm the apparent biases which I imputed to Stark in my report.

Among other items, in the *Lariat* Stark asserts that I [Paul] “didn’t do his research thoroughly, and is misinformed about much of what he reports on” and that he [Stark] “conducted the first national surveys in the sixties, and I am absolutely astonished at these accusations.” Stark continues to defend his contention that polls taken over a number of decades indicate that the number of American atheists is holding steady at around three to four percent. Another researcher argues that what “it comes down to is that this is an argument over semantics.” The article also states that most surveys do not explicitly ask whether the respondent is an atheist, instead just asking if they are religious or not (the source of this claim is not clear).

Although Stark can claim to be a pioneer in the sociology of religion, Gallup was surveying American opinion on religion for a great many years before he entered the field.

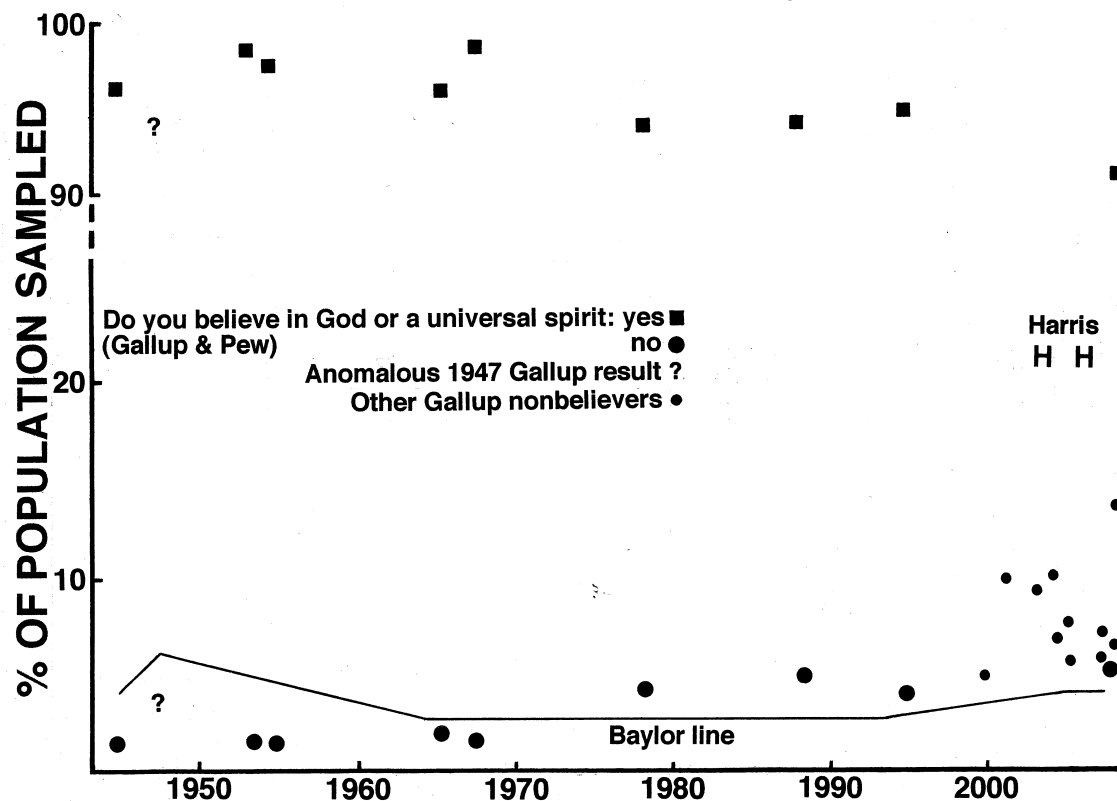
Contrary to *The Lariat* article, the number of polls that have specifically queried respondents concerning their belief in God after WW II has been large, amounting to dozens of surveys by a array of polling organizations.

Though semantics play a peripheral role in this debate, definitional issues are not the core problem with the Baylor study. The critical and disturbing flaw in the Baylor research is its repeated exclusion of large and important data sets. One of these sets contradicts the Baylor group’s hypothesis that monotheism among Americans has remained very low and essentially steady since World War II. The charge that my research is inadequate is a reversal of the actual situation. As my first report for the Council for Secular Humanism documents in detail, it is Stark and his group’s publications that have the hallmarks of poor, nonsystematic research because they have ignored so much of the extensive survey data that contradicts their position. This includes the extraordinary failure to make any mention of six decades worth of Gallup polls – literally dozens of surveys – that clearly document an increase in disbelief in God among Americans.

Some New Data and Analysis

In fact, I just discovered that the failure of the Stark team to examine the critical statistics is even worse than I thought. In order to understand the problem we need to go over some of the history of the issue. Over the half century from 1944 to 1994, Gallup periodically asked respondents the classic question “Do you believe in God or a universal spirit: yes or no.” Gallup dropped the question after 1994, both because it is simplistic, and because it is potentially confusing in the way it combines an amorphous universal-spirit concept with the Abrahamic style God. Still, the loss of this question, which had been worded consistently over so many years, seemed to mean that the best comparative measure of relative levels of belief and nonbelief did not extend into the twenty-first century. I say “seemed” because it turns out the Pew Forum asked the exact same question in 2008, for reasons that are as obscure as they are longitudinally valuable (religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report_religious-landscape-study-topline.pdf). We therefore have the data on hand needed to directly and definitively test whether Baylor’s claims that nontheism has been reported at relatively constant levels from World War II to today is correct or false. It cannot be overemphasized that because this 64-year data set depends on a single question whose wording has not changed, it is not vulnerable to objections of the form “Oh, it’s all semantics.”

From the 1940s through the 1960s, respondents answering “no” to the God or spirit question averaged 1.7 percent (all the Gallup statistics are listed in the first report). However, in five of the six polls during this period the number answering “no” ranged only between 1.23 and 1.69 percent. Only in the 1947 sample did an abnormally high 3.43 percent reply in the negative. The 1947 survey is therefore a statistical outlier (probably a random fluctuation), and its inclusion is open to criticism on sociological analytical grounds (the alternative, that theism peaked at the expense of nontheism during the ideological battle against atheistic communism of the 1950s, cannot be entirely ruled out). The average “no” response to the five more consistent remaining polls was 1.37 percent. During the same period the “yes” response rate was 94.21 to 98.46 percent, for an average of 96.9 percent. If the anomalous 1947 sample is removed, the lowest “yes” response was 96.22 percent, and the average is 97.43 percent. Rather than showing a 3- to 6-percent level of disbelief in God or a universal spirit during this period as Stark et. al. claim, disbelief was avowed by only about 1.5 percent of respondents. Because this value includes both atheists and agnostics who declined to acknowledge belief in the supernatural, the number of outright atheist respondents was probably well below one percent (in polls that distinguish between absolute atheists and other skeptics, the latter usually outnumber the former). Those responding that they did believe ranged between 97 and 98 percent.



This plot is expanded from the version in the original report. The Baylor line is their six-point plot of nontheists with their inflated 1940s Gallup values.

[NOTE: Place figure either here or before above paragraph, whatever works best in final layout]

From the 1970s on, the situation becomes quite different. From then until now, the percentage answering “yes” for belief in God or a universal spirit range from 95.65 percent down to an unprecedented low of 92 percent in the 2008 Pew sample, for an average of 94.11 percent. In no case has the percentage who answered “no” been as low as the 1.5 percent seen in prior decades; the percentage who deny belief has ranged from a *minimum* of 3.34 percent, up to the unprecedented 5 percent high in the Pew poll, for an average of 4.22 percent. That is two and half times higher than the rate of declared unbelief seen from the 1940s to 1960s average if all the early Gallup surveys are included, and three times higher if the aberrant 1947 sample is omitted. The latest 2008 Pew results indicate that nonbelievers make up three times more of the population than they used to if the 1947 sample is included, over three and a half times if it is not.

The results are inescapable. The only consistently worded longitudinal measurement of American theism versus nontheism shows that the latter have expanded a few fold since WW II. This conclusion is backed by the just released American Religious Identification Survey finding that the “number of outright atheists has nearly doubled since 2001” (www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org). The percentage of ARIS respondents who they

classified as atheists and agnostics combined constituted 12% of the population -- almost as high as a recent Gallup result, they are exceeded by the two Harris polls (designed to overcome American's reluctance to acknowledge their nontheism) that both found over a fifth of the population have become nonbelievers. The unique claim by Baylor that the percentage of nonbelievers has remained stable correspondingly lacks statistical support, and is scientifically falsified.

Despite having a large team of researchers, the Baylor study group either missed or knowingly dismissed the 2008 Pew question that clearly falsifies its conclusions. As I outline in the original article and show in the plot, the Baylor team also ignored a number of polls on the question of belief or disbelief in God which not only confirm the increase in nontheists at the expense of theists, but indicate that the numbers who are skeptical of God's existence yet not fully atheistic are higher than the Gallup/Pew surveys discussed above suggest (also see notes below). One must ask whether Stark and his team can still remain unaware that only 1.23 to 1.69 percent of respondents to the Gallup surveys of 1944, 1953, 1954, 1965 and 1967 denied belief in God or a universal spirit. All the Baylor group needed to do to avoid the charge of neglect of critical data was to present the pertinent results, and discuss why in its view this data does not indicate a rise in American nontheism. Perhaps they are unable to do so.

A Set of Technical Challenges -

Because the errors and omissions in the Baylor project are so extensive, I challenge Stark and his colleagues to move from issuing platitudes (or personal attacks, as discussed below), and explicitly address the following technical problems and questions as I have raised them in my first report and now in this follow-up:

- Explain why it was thought unnecessary to even mention, much less discuss, the entire body of Gallup surveys on the God question, and instead rely only the first two polls in the series. In particular, how they could have been unaware of these well-known figures before I brought them to their attention?
- Explain why it was thought necessary to inflate the number of alleged atheists in the 1944 and 1947 Gallup samples by including all nonrespondents, this being an obvious violation of basic survey analysis. And why, in the same plot, were nonrespondents not included at least some of the later surveys, giving the appearance of an attempt to manipulate the comparative data by the sociological equivalent of comparing apples and oranges?
- Present data and/or detailed analysis to provide convincing scientific evidence that more than three percent of Americans were consistently responding to surveys in a manner that shows they qualified as convinced atheists in the 1940s and 50s.

- Explain how the entire team of Baylor academic researchers failed to discover the Pew 2008 query that continues the classic Gallup question in its exact historic wording into the 2000s.
- Explain the decision not to address the great number of other surveys that indicate rising nontheism, as measured by rates of belief and disbelief in supernatural entities and powers.
- Retract the misleading plot that purports to track nontheism from World War II to the present using just six data points, the first two of which present inflated levels of nontheists.
- Present any recent poll that indicates as low a percentage of either absolute atheists or doubters in general (outright atheists plus agnostics, disbelievers, nonbelievers and the like), or as high a percentage of theists, as Gallup found over half a century ago.
- Produce a graphic plot contradicting the one herein that uses a similarly large set of surveys, including all the Gallup results plus the 2008 Pew and the Harris polls, and objectively shows that theism is not declining as nontheism increases in the United States.
- Justify the contention that the United States remains a highly religious nation when a 2008 megasurvey found that “only 51 percent of the public believes in a personal God and are absolutely certain that God exists” (pewforum.org/events/?EventID=190).
- Explain why Stark’s seemingly obscure calculations that church membership has persistently risen since the 1950s should be considered superior to the steady decline measured by a consistently worded and straightforward Gallup question on this matter.
- Explain how and why the Gallup results showing the long slide in church membership were ignored in the Baylor study. Again, does this reflect ignorance of the data or deliberate omission?
- Why was the World Values Survey (WVS) data on atheism in first-world nations the sole data set used to compare levels of disbelief when their results show that Spain is more atheistic than France, it being well known that it is the latter that is much more nontheistic? Why were the surveys that show higher levels of nontheism in advanced democracies ignored or dismissed, including the 2006 Times/Harris poll in which a third of the French proclaimed atheism (compared to 3 percent in the WVS)?
- If the Baylor team cannot produce convincing answers to some or all of the above technical challenges, then it need needs acknowledge its errors and omissions

when appropriate. In particular, it should acknowledge that the best available cumulative longitudinal data measures a significant proportional increase in atheists and other nontheists since World War II, and also that the numbers of strong atheists is markedly higher in some first world nations than its reports have admitted.

- Baylor is expending millions of dollars over a span of a decade on its religion survey project, including books released by their press to the general public. Because this material is not peer reviewed by those outside Baylor/Gallup, it is incumbent upon those involved to ensure that the research being released from the group and the university meet modern scientific and academic standards. At the head of the list of needed corrections, the practice of persistently excluding contradictory data must end. Baylor may wish to consider having the research peer reviewed before release.

I am not asking for perfection from Baylor; all research has its issues. And there are many points open to valid debate. But until the above problems are satisfactorily answered, those considering the results of the Baylor team past and future should view them as scientifically problematic if not false.

Is Just One “Militant Atheist” Critical of the Methods and Results of Stark and the Baylor Team?

In the *Lariat* and *Christianpost* Stark and others attempt to portray himself and his team as a set of widely acclaimed mainstream researchers whose research should be presumed sound. It is important for those following this debate to understand that I am not the only analyst who has noted problems with the research and conclusions by the Baylor team, and Stark in particular.

In *USA Today* (9/12/09), sociologist Barry Kosmin, director of Trinity College’s Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture and co-author of the authoritative American Religious Identification Surveys, labeled the key method that Baylor uses to conclude that growth in the number of nonreligious Americans does not imply a rise in the number nontheists “nonsense.” (For his technical discussion see www.trincoll.edu/NR/rdon/yres/ACZA8F2F-8AB9-4DD9-87B8-49069A3F475/0/SynopsisforWebsite.pdf.)

In his *Lariat* interview Roger Finke, a long-time collaborator of Stark’s, states that “they [Baylor] used recommended methods for collecting information, especially since they worked with Gallup [but see comments in my original report]. The Baylor team has done what they should do in this area.” Has Baylor used “recommended methods”? In my critical analysis I argue otherwise, in part because Baylor’s methods apparently ignore the well known “social desirability” problem in polling. Harris researcher Humphrey Taylor explains that “one of the problems with surveys where people are interviewed by people.... is that they [respondents] may not tell the truth to an interviewer, if the truth is embarrassing or if another answer is more socially desirable.... Socially desirable

behavior, such as... going to church are usually over reported” (www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=408; Kosmin makes similar observations in his above technical comment). The discriminatory attitudes held against American atheists are well documented (Edgell, P. et al. , 2006. *American Sociological Review* 71: 211-234). Taylor has described how Harris took steps to overcome this problem with the God question, and obtained markedly higher levels of reported nontheism than other surveys. A second Harris survey found similarly high reported levels of skepticism as I detail in the original article (both polls are included in the above plot). The Baylor team does not explain whether they and their partner Gallup took steps to overcome Americans’ reluctance to admit nontheism (judging from their low results, I surmise that they did not). In addition, they neglected to discuss the Harris methods and results.

The questionable research methods used by Stark are not limited to the Baylor study; other researchers have criticized him and some of his collaborators for using nonsystematic methods that exclude data that threatens to overturn their conclusions.

Stark and Finke are key proponents of the widely believed hypothesis that America’s religious free market is responsible for its high level of popular theism relative to other first-world nations where church and state are often linked. In their book *Sacred and Secular* (2004, Cambridge University Press), Pippa Norris of Harvard and Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan are severely critical of the Stark and Finke’s methods as well as their conclusions.

According to Norris and Inglehart, a:

thorough meta-review of the series of more than two dozen empirical studies published in the academic literature on the sociology of religion, conducted by [Mark] Chaves and [Philip] Gorski, concluded with harsh criticism of the theory:

The claim that religious pluralism and religious participation are generally and positively associated with one another – the core empirical hypothesis of the market approach to the study of religion – is not supported, and attempts to discredit countervailing evidence on methodological grounds must be rejected. A positive relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation can be found only in a limited number of contexts, while the concepts themselves translate poorly to non-modern settings [2001, *Annual Review of Religion* 27: 261-281] (*Sacred and Secular*; p. 13).

Norris and Inglehart also observe that “Finke and Stark provide numerous examples of specific limitations experienced by particular denominations and faiths in Western European countries. . . . Yet this approach is unsystematic, and a systematic bias may arise from the particular selection of cases” (p. 98). Norris and Inglehart then go on to cite additional examples of selective use of data by Stark and Finke: “It is true that the United States displays a diverse range of churches and temples in many communities, and relatively high rates of churchgoing and subjective religiosity, fitting the theory. But clear anomalies to this relationship exist, notably the high level of churchgoing evident in Ireland, Italy, Poland, Columbia, and Venezuela, despite the fact that the Catholic Church predominates as a virtual monopoly in these nations.” To this can be added the extremely high levels of theism apparent in Islamic theocracies, and the low levels measured in other western nations with long standing state-church separation such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

In short, a number of skilled, mainstream researchers have noticed that Stark and his collaborators frequently appear to select data in a manner that favors their largely pro-religious orientation. Norris and Inglehart also note a profound statistical error in the data with which Stark and Finke have supported their free market hypothesis: “most of the studies by Stark and Finke were contaminated by a coding error; there was a negative 1 in the formula rather than a positive 1 (p. 99).” The title of the *American Sociological Review* paper containing this quote and challenging the validity of the free market hypothesis is telling: “Religious Pluralism and Participation: why Previous Research is Wrong,” D. Voas et al. 2002, 67: 212-230.

The free market hypothesis promoted by Stark has been discredited to the degree that it is no longer considered viable in the general sociological community, although it is still widely promulgated by nonsociologists and the press; whether Stark still advocates the hypothesis is not clear. It is the contention of this researcher and many others, as well as most of the major survey organizations, that Stark’s thesis of the failure of American nontheism to expand is equally obsolete, and based on biased data analysis.

A Stark Slip?

Stark does not seem to realize that he exposed his apparent bias when he stated in *The Lariat* that “Americans differ a lot in what they conceive of God, but well over 90 percent of them conceive of Him somehow.” Note that Stark refers to God as a single male entity using the classic Judeo-Christian capitalized *Him*. It is well known that a significant portion of American believers are polytheists, some of whom (and others) worship a female deity. And a portion of those who accept a higher power conceive it as a greater force in the cosmos, not as an actual Him. It is unlikely that a researcher from one of the secular polling organizations would use such religious language.

The Stark Attack

The above slip provides subtle evidence of bias, but a much more aggressive slip up by Stark offers blatant evidence of the same.

I hoped that Stark et al would in the main respond to my technical criticisms – issued some time after their report and book appeared because of the analysis required -- with a thoughtful counter analysis based on similarly technical concerns. An initial response could have been along the lines that they continued to think that their methods and results were sound, and that after investigating my claims they would respond in due time. Instead Stark engaged in disturbing tactics that require a detailed response.

My reports are careful to describe Stark's beliefs and his potential bias based solely on his published works and commentary on his work, and to employ non-inflammatory terminology. Nor do I presume that the Baylor results are defective because they have a theistic or Christian origin. Because examination of their contents found them to be so defective, and because none of the more secular survey groups are producing similarly proreligious results, it became unavoidable to consider whether religiosity might be a factor in the apparent Baylor errors. Had they not excluded so much data, or if their analysis of that data had been correct, the matter would never have come up.

In the *Lariat* and *Christianpost* Stark and others immediately questioned my qualifications. Doing so is not *a priori* inappropriate, but I believe the means they are using are. Stark characterizes himself as a neutral mainstream academic. Yet he descends to the level of incendiary personal attack when he contends that it's "important for him [Paul], as a militant Atheist, to believe that religion will disappear very soon." Stark did not even tone this down by posing it as a hypothesis, as in "is Paul criticizing the Baylor study because he is an Atheist so militant that he must believe that religion will disappear very soon?" Stark had no qualms in making the statement as though it is fact while not providing supporting evidence.

There is nothing wrong with being strongly atheistic, but the term *militant* is often applied to those who commit violence. Whether Stark intended to imply such is by not certain, but *militant atheist* is a code phrase used by members of the religious right to smear assertive atheists as extremists. I do not believe it is ethical for an academic to apply such a term publicly to another researcher. Nor does Stark present evidence that I am even a strident atheist, perhaps one dedicated to the cause of converting large numbers of my fellow Americans to atheism. He could not, because no documentation exists that so portrays me.

In a recent article in *Free Inquiry* magazine, I explain that the level of religiosity in a particular society is predominantly determined by socioeconomic circumstances: higher levels of secure middle-class prosperity and widespread corporate-consumerism automatically suppress popular religiosity ("The Big Religion Questions Finally Solved," *Free Inquiry* December 2008/January 2009, p. 24-36, also see the *Edge* article I co-authored at www.edge.org/q2009/q09_2.html#paul). In this conclusion I am in agreement with technical work by Norris and Inglehart and others. As a result, I contend that the ideological contest at the center of our religious culture wars has much less influence upon the level of belief and disbelief in a national population than activists on either side tend to believe. Nor is there a pressing need for nontheist organizations to engage in

“missionary work” in order to convert the masses to nontheism – the masses’ mere achievement of secure prosperity accidentally but consistently achieves that effect. I also discuss how for most people, the choice between religious belief and disbelief actually tends to be superficial and casual. It is not possible for a researcher who has concluded it is probably infeasible to persuade large numbers of people by argument to disbelieve in the gods to be a “militant” dedicated to converting the masses by convincing them that atheism is on the rise. Exasperated sometimes, yes; militant, no.

Even Stark’s claim that I am a hardline “atheist” is wrong. I have never claimed to be an absolute atheist in print or privately. If Baylor, Gallup, or any pollster asked me whether I am a convinced atheist who is certain there is no God, I would answer no. If I were asked whether I am an agnostic with serious doubt about the reality of the supernatural, I would answer yes, being an agnostic in the tradition of Thomas Huxley who coined the term. In my view it is not scientifically possible to absolutely falsify the existence of supernatural entities, and so I currently believe or disbelieve in the existence of the gods to the same extent that I do in other undocumented beings such as ghosts or alien visitors: provide convincing evidence as to their existence, and I will go accept it; until then I remain prudently skeptical about unsubstantiated claims.

Stark’s assertion that it is important for me to believe that religion will disappear in the near future is also errant on multiple levels. Anyone who thinks that religion is about to swiftly among humans disappear is badly misinformed; there is no data supporting such a belief. So why did Stark accuse me of being out of touch with reality? It is my opinion that Stark is being deceptive on this matter. It is easy enough to establish my stance. A basic premise of the socioeconomic hypothesis my research supports is that popular religion implodes only when socioeconomic circumstances have reached the level seen in prosperous progressive democracies. To wit, in my *Free Inquiry* article previously referenced, I state that “if the bulk of humanity remains mired in inadequate socioeconomic circumstances, then religious supernaturalism will continue to enjoy considerable success.” It being highly unlikely that the secure middle-class prosperity that encourages mass nontheism will be enjoyed by billions for some time to come, obviously I do not “believe that religion will disappear very soon.” Although the eventual virtual evaporation of supernaturalism among humans cannot be entirely ruled out, I would be surprised if it ever occurred. (Even in France, one of the most secular Western democracies, about 15 percent of the non-Muslim population continues to be believing Christians.)

To get a better handle on the impropriety of Stark’s response, consider the outrage that would result if I claimed that “it is important for Stark, a militant Fundamentalist, to believe that religion will always be popular.” Aside from not wanting to be rude, I did not say anything of that sort because I have no evidence that he is inclined toward violence, nor am I certain about his position on the religious spectrum.

Whatever my hopes that Stark would reply in an academic manner, I was not surprised by his swift resort to a personal attack because it fits his pattern of apparent bias against nontheists. Consider his statement in a *Washington Times* article covering the Baylor

study (September 19, 2008): “The religious people don’t care about the irreligious people, but the irreligious are prickly. I think they’re just angry.” One can ask, who is the prickly and angry party here? I do not deny that believers can conduct sound research on the prevalence of unbelief. Does Stark believe that nonbelievers are capable of conducting valid research on religion?

Another Set of Challenges --

Whatever his motivations, Stark’s *ad hominem* and potentially libelous statements about my opinions are outside the bounds of scholarship and need to be dealt with. And it is time that someone call him on his history of attacks upon those who are skeptical about the supernatural. I therefore challenge Stark to do one of the following:

- Provide documentation supporting that I am a militant, a convinced atheist, or believe that religion will disappear very soon. Or....
- Do the right thing and retract the above assertions.
- Clarify whether he knew, before making the above charges, that I predict in print that religion will last at least as long as there are people who do not enjoy sufficiently secure prosperity and safety.
- Issue a statement making clear whether or not he believes atheist and other nontheistic researchers are capable of objective analysis on matters involving religion.
- If Stark does not meet my demands that he document or retract his characterization of myself, I call upon Baylor University to investigate the propriety of these claims and if appropriate, issue a statement of censure. Same if he does not acknowledge that nonbelieving scholars are capable of conducting objective research.

Other Criticisms of Paul --

The Christianpost article includes additional questions about my qualifications and past research. It cites a self-described Christian statistician, Scott Gilbreath, as a critic of my 2005 Journal of Religion and Society study (moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html). The first attempt to compare societal conditions as a function of religiosity between advanced nations, it was a peer reviewed technical paper in an academic journal on matters involving religion and society, and has been cited favorably by respected analysts (e. g. www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=D27BB754-E7F2-99DF-3E2F8A28942743F5; www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=Print&id=2203614). The journalistic standards of the Christianpost are ambiguous, the Gilbreath piece they cite was an unvetted weblog that questioned, for instance, why I did not include certain western European nations when my paper explained that critical data was not available for them, or that they are too small to compare to the bigger countries. Claiming to be a

statistical expert, Gilbreath challenges my limitation of the nations sampled to the first world when this is standard procedure that has been followed in other cross-national studies cited in my paper. Most importantly, no critic of the JR&S paper has met the challenge that I posed therein, to statistically demonstrate that higher levels of popular religiosity are associated with lower levels of overall societal dysfunction in the successful democracies, or at least show that any nation that is both highly religious has or ever has had levels of social ills as low as those seen in the most secular democracies. Until such is done the basic conclusions of the JR&S study stand. When I sent a follow-up paper to JR&S replying to my critics, the editor declined to even consider the study on the basis that the journal would no longer consider manuscripts on the subject! I have a chapter invited by Pitzer sociologist Phil Zuckerman in press in an academic book expanding the JR&S results with what is by far the most comprehensive statistical comparison of socioeconomic circumstances in the prosperous democracies. Having neither contacted me or done the proper background research, *Christianpost* did not let its readers know that I have authored and edited books on other matters scientific through *Scientific American*, the Johns Hopkins University Press, and Princeton University Press (in press), written a number of peer-reviewed technical papers, published analyses in *Nature*, *The Journal of Experimental Biology*, *BioScience* and *Anatomical Record* (in press), placed academic pieces discussing matters religious and societal in *The Journal of Medical Ethics and Pediatrics*, and have a ground breaking atheodistic paper in press in *Philosophy and Theology*. I have been asked by the National Science Federation to review whether other researchers' are meeting the criteria for receiving government funding.

Final Challenges --

- *To anyone who wishes to defend the Baylor thesis.* Let us debate the state of religion and society in the western democracies in one or more public forums. Will this determine the course of religion versus secularism in America? My research says no. But I do love the intellectual contest.

To the press. The Baylor team has failed to answer important questions. When most other major survey organizations (Pew, NORC, ARIS, Harris) are reporting a rise in nontheism among Americans, why does a conservative Christian institution stand alone in denying this pattern? Why does that stance continue, when the Baylor team appears to be selecting data that favors a retention of high levels of religiosity to the exclusion of that which does not, and when some mainstream researchers are harshly critical of its methods?

In addition, sociological evidence for the increasing secularization of American society has been accumulating for some years. Recent surveys even suggest that secularization is accelerating. Yet the news media have done little to cover this growing body of research. That a seminal study on the subject, the data- and

analysis-rich *Sacred and Secular* by Norris and Inglehart, has been largely ignored is particularly unacceptable.

- *To other researchers.* Analyses of the Baylor results and my counter conclusions in the technical literature are called for.

Closing Observations

I began this project when I was forwarded an e-mail that suggested someone should look into the Baylor study and see if it was correct. That was shortly before the eruption of the financial crisis that now grips the nation. Given the current emergency, why should anyone still be concerned about the Baylor group and its claims? Aside from the matters of intellectual and scientific truth, the United States is in the process of deciding what future course its society should take. A major debate is ongoing regarding whether a highly religious or a strongly secular democratic culture produces superior societal conditions. It is important for experts and the public to understand whether the U.S. will retain the highly pro-religious culture that has gotten us where we are as a nation today -- for good or bad -- or whether America will embrace the process of secularization that has been associated with the much lower levels of societal dysfunction found in other western democracies. Selective and, in my view, misleading presentation of survey data does nothing to advance this process.