

**2008 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**  
**Congregationally-Based Religion:**  
**Boon or Bane for Faith in the West?\***

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*In this 2008 Presidential Address to the Religious Research Association I examine the state of religious expression in the United States and the West, currently and historically, with a focus on religious rituals and the communities in which those rituals occur. Changes in the locus of ritual observance from larger communities to the congregation and changes in the logic of ritual observance from a societal necessity to a personal preference have led to a situation in which religious expression is marginalized and weakened. Religion is what religion does, and it cannot do what it does without viable rituals and viable communities that practice and sustain those rituals. The American context allowed religion to flourish in a competitive congregational environment, but like the advent of church membership that created the possibility of non-membership, the competitive parish has led to competition with secular alternatives—alternatives that seem to be winning the battle for hearts, minds, and time.*

There were to be two presidential addresses this year at the meetings of the Religious Research Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion—this one and another by Dean Hoge tomorrow night. Sadly, we will not be having the address by Dean. Like many of you, I counted Dean as a friend as well as a colleague. He was the best sort of person, and it is very strange that he is gone. He seemed somehow a permanent part of these two societies and will be greatly missed.

**RELIGION IS WHAT RELIGION DOES**

*What religion is, is what religion does:* it mediates the sacred for a community and for individuals in that community. It does this through rituals that are composed of symbolic acts, which are performed, practiced, learned, and reinforced in communal settings. Private religious expression is dependent on prior (and often ongoing) communal expressions that are “borrowed” for private use. This is true even if the prior communal connection is not acknowledged or is denigrated—as in the case of “lived religion,” people who are “spiritual but not religious” and “Sheilatism” (McGuire 2008; Marler and Hadaway 2002; Bellah *et al.* 1985).

Two things are of paramount importance to the practice, utility, and viability of religion: the rituals themselves and the community in which and for which they are performed.

## A RELIGIOUS NATION

Because religious participation is not universal in the West and people no longer believe or belong in one in a taken-for-granted manner, religion appears to be *a quality that people hold in more or less quantity*—rather than a type of action in which people participate and benefit from what religion does: mediate the sacred for a community and for individuals within that community.

The tendency to treat religion as a quality that people hold in more or less quantity conditions public and academic discourse about the status of religion in America and other nations in the world. Thus, as all of us have heard and most of us believe, America is a religious nation, and in that religiousness, America is fairly, but not completely exceptional (at least for a modern Western country).<sup>1</sup> The people in Canada are fairly religious; Australia used to be as religious as the United States, but isn't anymore; Ireland is still pretty religious; Britain, France, and northern Europe are not religious at all. Japan, which is not a Western nation (but is certainly modern), may seem religious or irreligious depending on the criteria used—which suggests that the criteria may be the problem (Roemer 2009).

The sources used for making assessments about national “religiousness” are for the most part poll-based measures of religious participation and religious belief. Americans say they attend religious services more often, on average, than do people in most other Western nations and are more likely to hold traditional, conservative religious beliefs (a personal god, the devil, hell as a real place, the Bible as the divinely inspired Word of God, etc.).

Being a “religious nation” or a “religious person” presumes a sliding scale from complete atheism or indifference (no religious acts, no religious beliefs, and no spiritual musings or sensitivity) to complete religiosity (everyone attends religious services several times a week and everyone either holds strong religious beliefs or is imbedded, selflessly in the ultimate reality). These poles are clearly ideals, and no nation and no individual would actualize either end—although not without considerable trying or goading.

Because of low levels of religious participation and religious belief, certain nations are characterized as “non-religious” by Americans, and we presume that there are few religious people living there. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1992:19) state, for instance, that in most other Western nations, “religious indifference, not piety is rife.” As a nation, America may seem very religious to outsiders and to some American social scientists, but no one would claim that it is anywhere close to achieving pervasive piety. We do, however, have a Bible Belt, which is peopled by many very religious individuals. On the pietistic end of the religiosity scale people are infused with religion, attend worship almost daily, read scripture constantly, use religious language in everyday speech, and in Evangelical Christian terms, “pray without ceasing.” But not everyone or even most people in the “Bible Belt” are religious in this manner—despite considerable trying and goading.

For anyone reared in conservative Protestantism, and historically anyone reared in most if not all Catholic and Protestant churches, the “right” end of the religiosity scale was something to be pursued throughout one's life, and also something to feel guilty about along the way. It may take a Zen Buddhist nearly a lifetime to experience enlightenment, but a young Southern Baptist could look forward to an entire lifetime of religious striving (or what was once called perfecting) without the hope of ever reaching their goal of becoming Christ-like. And unlike the Buddhist for whom Satori is not something to be sought or to feel guilty at

not achieving, being Christ-like is something the Christian should constantly strive for, and guilt is a primary motivating force to work at it. And at end of life the conservative Protestants will still feel inadequate and perhaps wonder if God might not let them have their eternal reward. Thus, we are able to understand the *Today Show* interview of Billy Graham a few years ago: when asked if he was going to heaven, Billy could only say, "I hope so." For Billy Graham and countless other conservative Protestants, the concept of eternal security (once saved, always saved) is trumped by guilt-ridden inadequacy of never measuring up to the elusive standard of the extreme end of the religiosity scale. Rick Warren's (2002) popular book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, is the current manifestation of Christian goading in the direction of pietistic perfection.

So in spite of the fact that the United States is judged to be a religious nation, populated by mostly religious people, the fact that most people cannot be characterized as "devoted" using Christian Smith's (2005) definition (attending religious services weekly or more, considering faith to be very important, feeling very close to God, being involved in a religious group, praying often, and reading scripture on occasion) would seem to suggest that Americans really are not all that religious and thus America is not a religious nation—only that its people are somewhat more religious on average than people in other non-religious nations.

## OUR FAILING FOUNDING FATHERS AND THEIR LEGACY

The tendency to view people and nations as never-ending spiritual reclamation projects and for those who study religion to see religious expression on a sliding low-to-high scale is reflective of the extent to which the American form of competitive, conversionist, congregationally-based religion is accepted as normative (see Finke and Stark 1992:19). Such a perspective presumes that pervasive religious participation is the standard against which all nations should be measured, rather than a result of our unusual history of settlement. The United States was *initially* founded by sect-like religious communities that were voluntary in nature and led by religious zealots. Religious homogeneity at a high level was expected within tight-knit communities. The ideal was a New Jerusalem, which was actualized momentarily in some colonies and then rapidly fell apart. Our churches want to get it back, but they cannot.

Not only did the second and third generation of Americans not approximate the religious zeal of their parents, the sparsely populated geographic setting and the immigration of persons with non-religious motives led to a rapid diffusion of the Euro-American population outside the bounds of a parish/community structure.<sup>2</sup> High membership standards and lack of any means to control the population led to a situation, documented by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1992:15), where no more than 17% of the population was "religious" in the sense of regular religious participation and membership in a religious community. So many Americans were "unchurched" that pundits in the eighteenth century could rightly call many Americans "Nothingarians" (Marty 1970:18).

Thus began the struggle to incorporate the vast (and increasing) population who were outside the church and perfect them into properly devoted believers through a patchwork of congregations and overlapping parishes. It was a difficult task, at which the churches and other religious bodies were largely successful, but at which they now seem to be losing ground.

## TO SHEPHERD OR CONVERT?

Religion exists or persists as ritual procedures that mediate the sacred for the community and for the individuals who make up that community. For most of human history religion was embedded in the culture of a people and did not form a separate, differentiated institution and was not contained within “religious communities” to which some persons belonged and others did not. Religious rites or ceremonials were performed by holy persons or priests on behalf of a population and for individuals who accepted the validity and necessity of those rites in a taken-for-granted manner. Being “religious” or personally devoted was not generally an issue, except perhaps in the case of the holy person, although even here it was typically the *role* of the person and the *efficacy of the rite* that was important rather than the permanent religious quality of that individual. The religious system, acting for the larger community, was typically concerned about personal normative behavior, but being a religious zealot was not required or really expected. The purpose of mediating the sacred was to foster or ensure some form of harmony with the sacred for the community and/or the individual. Of course, the parameters and meaning of that harmony varied widely across human societies.

Where religion is an expression of communal life in a tribe, society, or even a town or parish (in the sense that rituals are performed on behalf of a defined community), the viability of religion is dependent on the accepted necessity for the religious rituals performed on behalf of the community. This was not a matter of “faith” (Berger 1992:141). That the gods were there and that they must be attended to was taken for granted, as was the presence of various malign supernatural forces that religious ceremonies held in check (Bruce 1996:28). The rituals certainly contributed to community solidarity and the formation/reinforcement of a normative structure, but ultimately, the value attached to the rituals resided in the community’s need for having the sacred mediated for it. So if the need for religious mediation at the community level wanes (as it has where religion is seen as a potentially oppressive entity or as simply irrelevant to the orderly operation of a modern, differentiated society), the religious institution and the rituals it performs will necessarily lose status and be treated as residual matters by the dominant institutions in society (Beyer 1994:104; Berger 1996:179). Without community need for its function, a religious institution which had been pervasive and seamlessly integrated into communal life must rely on or create a religious community—a community of those who retain a privatized need for religious rituals.

Christianity, of course, did not begin as the religion for a people or a society. It began as a sect, which later became a movement. Rather than simply performing religious rituals for a pre-existing community, it is necessary for a religious movement (or sect) to *create and sustain a community* that accepts its rituals. The demands on the rituals, the priest or church leader, and for those who join the community are thus necessarily expanded. The religious leader or priest must do much more than lead rituals for the community. He or she must keep the community together, deal with finances, recruit other leaders, mediate conflict, etc., in addition to the core task of mediating the sacred through performing religious rituals.

The ultimate goal of most movements and particularly for a religious movement (because they are not comfortable with a truly differentiated structure) is to reform, displace, or otherwise become the dominant religious expression for a people or a community. In the case of sectarian religion the goal is much more limited, but it amounts to the same thing—being

the dominant religious expression for a more narrowly defined community that accepts the value of its rituals.

But because movements and sects originated with an ideology or religious system held by a collection of zealots, rather than as a cultural system tacitly accepted by everyone, *it is very difficult for such a religious group to become the thing that it never was*. The urge is there to become the religion for a people and to shift from *converting* to what I will call *shepherding* (mediating the sacred for a defined community that accepts the validity of the religion, such as in Judaism); but movements can never be completely comfortable with shepherding. And if a society was in fact largely “converted,” the conversionist impulse is typically re-directed at perfecting and reforming nominal members into zealots—so that the entire community will exhibit the same character as the original movement. Failing at that, energy may be directed at creating new movements either within or apart from the dominant religion, such as in the case of the monastic movement, the reformation, and the never-ending process of American denominations splitting off from one another. And if Evangelically-oriented believers lack enough unchurched prospects, they can always create more by disputing the salvation or the beliefs of others and redefining them as unbelievers or apostates.

For much of Christian history, the “conversion” of a population was more *wholesale* than *retail*. In medieval Europe, for instance, as leaders were converted to Christianity and pagan shrines smashed, Christian rites simply replaced pagan rites and were performed with much the same logic (and often with the same general form) as prior pagan rites (Fletcher 1997:49-51). The medieval European pattern was that of a nominally religious or superstitious population for whom religious rites were performed. Participation in the form of bodily presence was required but was not really necessary. The ritual had efficacy in itself, on behalf of the population, and the limited evidence that exists suggests that at least the “important” parts of the ritual (such as the Elevation of the Host during the Eucharist) were attended to by the population. Thus the ritual was successful in that people participated in it and paid attention to it (they were entrained according to Collins [2004:52]). The level of “devotion” wasn’t really an issue for the general population. The primary issues were: Is the population Christian rather than pagan, and do people attend to the ritual as expected (or required)? The priests were expected to be holy, and although a great many were not their lack of piety did not detract from the perceived holiness of the rites they performed.

Christianity in Europe eventually took on many of the characteristics of the religion of a culture rather than a conversionist sect or movement. Yet the evangelizing impulse was still latent in Medieval Christianity. It had led to the drive to convert the population of Europe, the creation of the monastic stratum, the Crusades, and the conversionist sects that came to the New World.

The American context in the eighteenth century was not greatly unlike that of seventh century Europe. Both shared a largely enchanted, dualistic universe. And in both cases there were few churches, not many qualified clergy, and a large population that had not been “gathered in.” In Europe that population was nominally pagan, whereas in America the population was nominally Christian. If nothing else, that made the gathering in a bit easier, with fewer martyrs. The key difference was that in Europe the effort was to convert and gather in an existing, somewhat settled population and overlay a Christian parish (and in some cases a political) structure on that population, whereas in America the challenge was to gather in a rapidly growing, unsettled population and create a parish system in a context of religious

diversity. Doing so “Christianized” the land in both cases and furthered the process of community-building—*i.e.*, providing the population with religious and administrative structures.

Rather than establishing stable geographical parishes (the church as the religious institution for a defined area), religious observance in America was conducted in congregational settings, initially in localized religious monopolies and later in the context of what I have called the “competitive parish” (Hadaway 1982:81). The American context of settlement militated against the kind of settled parishes that existed in most of Europe, and this situation bred the uneasy sense of churches in the midst of unsaved masses—who were outside the control of the church and of the town. Thus arose the American evangelizing impulse—to corral back in the population, make them members, and reestablish control (both social and religious).

For churches who had their roots in the European parish system, the ultimate goal was to reestablish a proper parish structure in which the population would observe religious rituals that were performed on their behalf and in which “perfecting” could occur. And if a religious monopoly was not possible, the goal of a religious denomination was to incorporate and shepherd “our share of the population” or “our people” as part of or apart from a larger Protestant majority. In the case of the Episcopal Church, that goal was to incorporate and minister to our “2 %”; for the Roman Catholic Church, that goal was to corral and incorporate nominally Catholic immigrants and keep them from succumbing to the lure of Protestantism in its many guises.

But for churches without much of a direct historical connection to a European parish system—those who were essentially born into the evangelizing ethos—the *evangelical impulse was intrinsic to who they were*. For them, the world and this nation would always be lost. Society would never be religious enough on the sliding scale, nor would people ever be devoted enough to be conformed to the image of God. And so continued the effort to *corral* and *control* the population, either as a never-ending goal or in the hopes of establishing religious order on an unchurched population.

## THE COMPETITIVE PARISH

Religious activity in America occurs primarily in congregational form or a derivative of it. This form was inevitable given the pluralistic manner in which America was settled and the haphazard, competitive way the religious population was ingathered. So pervasive is this form that even faiths that do not normally exhibit congregational structure or that typically thrive in geographical parishes (such as Buddhism and Catholicism, respectively), assumed a congregational form as they adapted to the American context. They conduct their rituals within voluntary religious communities that co-exist and compete with other voluntary religious communities. The Reformation in Europe had introduced the novel concept of church membership and the possibility of choosing to belong or not belong to a religious community (Bruce 1996:28). The American context added the additional element of choosing which religious community to which a person might belong.

Churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, etc. are the places where religious rituals take place. They are structured as religious communities, and they are where religious behavior, tools, and beliefs are learned and practiced. Although ambient religion is still evident in the United States, like the *cat hair* that floats around my house, this ethereal stuff would not persist without active creatures to produce it.

Since religion in America is in congregational form, the effort to work at what could be called the “evangelical imperative” took place *through congregations*. Churches and other religious congregations became part of the nation-building process and were successful in gathering in the population as long as there was a ready supply of un-gathered religiously-minded persons in newly settled territory or territory to be settled. New congregations not only gathered in the unchurched, but they created community where little community existed before. The churches helped colonize and civilize the New Worlds (America and Canada, but also Australia). This worked well until the population (including new immigrant groups) was substantially “churched” by the late 1920s, at which time growth leveled off except among groups concentrated in the lower classes (which were still growing and less gathered in). Prior to that time all American denominations could be rightly called evangelical. There was no religious “mainline” separated from Protestant Evangelicalism (Quebe-deaux 1974:5; Marty 1976:53). But after that time, what we now call the mainline or “oldline” began to act like the job of evangelism had been done. It was time to act (collectively) like the religion for the nation, not as conversionist sects who had to fight against the increasingly secular culture of the nation. As befitted a largely “churched” culture, church participation slowed in the 1920s and 1930s with a number of mainline denominations experiencing decline for the first time.

But then came the post-World War II era of the late 1940s through 1960, which ushered in a new wave of population growth, expansion into new territory (the suburbs), and subsequent church growth. Massive numbers of new congregations were started and *denominational growth rates greatly exceeded the growth of the population*. During this era congregations helped colonize a new territory, gathering in and providing community for a population that was unusually amenable to church participation: young families with children. The church was triumphant, growth was pervasive, and mainline church leaders were featured regularly on the covers of *Time*, *Life* and other national magazines.

All other things being equal, church growth is largely a matter of demography; and without some unusual opportunity such as a new frontier, new suburbs, or new immigrant groups, growth levels tend to follow the rate of general population growth. And with fertility rates plummeting in the 1960s, suburbanization stabilizing, and communities becoming more demographically diverse, rates of denominational growth (*mainline and Evangelical*) dropped even faster than the population growth rate was declining. Only Mormons were largely unaffected because they maintained a rate of natural increase that exceeded that of many third world nations.

Without the easy growth and expansion in the manner in which American congregations were good at (colonizing new territory and gathering in new populations of religiously-minded people), the problems latent in a congregational structure became apparent. The community that supports the congregation *is* the congregation (rather than the geographical parish). Thus, the congregation must be successful not only in performing rituals that mediate the sacred for its community, the created community itself (the congregation) must be *viable and self-supporting*. The very character of the community (socially and economically) is at issue for the congregation in a way that a geographical parish or tribal religion does not have to deal with. The leader of a congregation, rather than being a holy man for a tribe or a local representative of a larger church, must be a leader who can solicit funds, mediate conflict, deal with zoning issues, organize building programs, etc. as well as perform reli-

gious rituals. The congregation is a *small business* operating as a voluntary organization, dependent on donations, and in direct competition with other such businesses. Such organizations are increasingly precarious in terms of their economic and social viability. Just in the last eight years the percentage of American congregations reporting that they are in good or excellent financial health declined from 66% in 2000 to 56% in 2005 and 48% in 2008 (and those data are from April and May of 2008 and do not reflect the severe recession that began later that year).

Congregations are increasingly expensive to run, and starting a new one is nearly cost prohibitive, except for religious entrepreneurs who fund “startups” themselves. Ministers are not trained in running small businesses and generally have no idea about how to make their small businesses grow. So they flail around, with some succeeding to great acclaim, some failing miserably, and most simply stabilizing in a precarious existence. Advice offered by national denominational leadership, congregational consultants, and celebrity clergy typically reflects an earlier, more communal and less costly era or asks clergy to lead their congregations like a corporate CEO would lead a for-profit company.

Clergy must lead the congregation every day of the year rather than just during religious feasts or rites of passage. They are not just playing the role of religious leader. They must *be* religious leaders and maintain an aura of religiosity and moral superiority. Unfortunately, they often fail in this, and their failure reflects badly on the religious community they lead and *even on the validity of the church* as a source of religious goods. This is presuming that a denomination can recruit enough suitable people to play the role of congregational leader. Increasingly, the Roman Catholic Church cannot, and there is a serious question as to whether the majority of persons ordained by mainline churches, in particular, are up to the task. Furthermore, religious congregations are expected to be qualitatively different from other organizations and to house devout, friendly parishioners. When Sunday school teachers and deacons turn out to be child rapists or mass murderers, the disconnection is newsworthy and further undermines the reputation and viability of all religious communities.

There are many wonderful congregations in America with transcendent, meaningful worship, but there are also very large numbers of not-so-great congregations. Similarly, there are good ministers and not so good ministers. Some ministers are lazy; most work hard. But as Dan Olson (2008:355-56) reminded us in his 2006 Religious Research Association presidential address, the tendency of ministers to work or not work hard is not correlated with success in increasing a denomination’s share of the population. The efforts of good congregations and bad congregations and good clergy and bad clergy essentially *cancel each other out*. However, religious groups do vary in the relative success and appeal of their religious rituals. The evangelical imperative and the difficulty in maintaining a viable congregation has led to the tendency to create successful rituals at all costs. Thus we have seen huge increases in so-called “contemporary worship” among Evangelical congregations to the point where well over half (56%) now use PowerPoint or visual projection equipment “always or often.” Among the largest American churches, the “mega-churches,” almost all (97%) do so, according to Thumma and Bird (2008:3). Churches that want to thrive and grow realize that they are in competition with other congregations for participants and with non-church alternatives for time use. So they attempt to make their services more exciting and “fun” through rock bands, praise teams, drama, and multi-media technology.

On Evangelical college campuses contemporary worship as a style is somewhat passé today, however. At Samford University, where my wife teaches, the “traditional” contem-

porary worship service was displaced years ago by a neo-Calvinist service, and more recently by Emergent Church-style worship. In the past year some students are shifting their attention to “third space” congregations off campus, where services are held in bars (prior to opening), coffee shops, and other secular settings where unchurched people are more likely to feel at home. The faddist nature of what qualifies as attractive worship is another indication of the potential down-side of a congregational approach to religious expression in a competitive environment: the difficulty in institutionalizing new alternative forms and the rapidity at which they can become outmoded and non-viable. You cannot invest hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars for a new form of congregation that will be passé in five years.

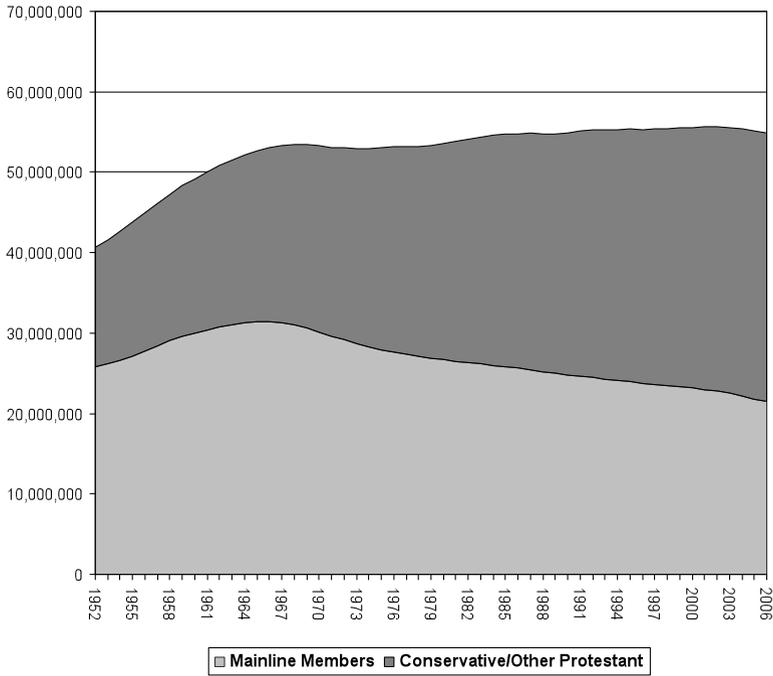
Mainline congregations are still testing the water with contemporary worship and the Emergent Church. The evangelical imperative is not as strong among the mainline as it is in conservative Protestantism. Mainline congregations act as if the successful churching of America allowed them to relax and simply shepherd their religious communities as if they were geographical parishes and as if the minister were primarily a representative of the faith in that setting, performing not very successful religious rituals for an educated, increasingly older membership with relatively low standards for worship. As Collins (2008) observes, it is fine for a religion to produce rituals that do not result in much “collective effervescence” as long as the religion is pervasive and accepted as the ritual provider for the community. But religion is not pervasive in America or any other Western nation, and mainline congregations have lost their taken-for-granted status as religious outlets for the middle and upper classes. Furthermore, starting new mainline congregations is much more expensive than Evangelical congregations with much less potential payoff in terms of growth. Lacking viable business plans and facing exorbitant costs, most mainline judicatories have nearly ceased efforts to start new congregations.

Because mainline denominations act like collections of geographic parishes in a stable religious setting rather than congregations in competition, they view the larger community as their “responsibility” in much the same way as an actual established church would. For this reason, mainline denominations tend to push non-religious social agendas in a paternalistic manner for their communities and the nation. Forgetting that their constituency is voluntary and can leave, they also find themselves embroiled in conflict—largely over non-religious issues that come to the forefront because of their efforts to admonish and shepherd the larger community regarding divisive issues. The conflict over homosexuality is a case in point. The conflict is derivative, but the impact is extreme because of the effect on already tenuous congregations.

Due to the greater viability of their congregations and the persistence of an Evangelical religious culture in the South, the Evangelical/conservative component of those who belong to Christian congregations has increased, whereas beginning in the mid-1960s the mainline Christian segment has been in decline. Putting these two trends together results in the graph displayed in Figure 1. As can be seen, overall growth was quite rapid in the 1950s and early 1960s. After several years of overall decline in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the continued growth of the conservatives and the bottoming out of the worst mainline declines in the 1980s resulted in very slow overall growth through the 1990s—even though there was a percentage loss relative to the larger population.

These figures are based on known membership values for denominations with reliable membership data, with added estimates for the rest of the mainline and Evangelical sectors.

**Figure 1: White Protestant Membership Trends: 1952-2006**



Source: Various editions of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (e.g. Linder 2008), denominational reports, and the author’s adjustments for changing reporting procedures.

Unlike Hout, Greeley, and Wilde’s (2001) data in “The Demographic Imperative,” I am dealing with *membership* here rather than problematic poll-based data on religious identity. Even so, differing demographic profiles and differential birth rates have affected these trends and will continue to do so probably to a greater extent than Hout predicted. Even though there has been a convergence in birth rates between mainline and conservative *adherents*, very large differences remain in the differential age structure of the groups—in terms of who actually belongs to and attends the churches. And this will necessarily affect future membership trends. For instance, actuarial data for Episcopal Church members suggests that deaths annually exceed births by around 18,000 members. In the mid 1970s the United Church of Christ was concerned that 23% of those present at Sunday worship were 65 years or older, as compared to the 14% in the general population. But by 2002, the proportion age 65+ was 43%, as compared to 16% in the general population. The disproportionate number of older active members is more pronounced in the mainline, but even among conservatives, there is an increasing tendency for the most active members to be older than the general population.

The white Protestant sector of American society has been holding its own due largely to the continued growth of conservative denominations (albeit barely). But in the past few years

declines in several conservative bodies, (including the Southern Baptist Convention in 2007) and accelerated decline in most mainline bodies (to levels not seen since the early 1970s), has led to a net decline overall. This decline is despite the evangelical imperative and a short-lived rise in “spiritual seeking.”

The fact of the matter is that it is difficult for most congregations to grow and quite easy for them to decline. *And declines tend to be greater than growth.* So in the case of several mainline denominations, more congregations are actually growing than declining, but the *declines are so large* that they overcome the growth of the growing congregations by a large amount. This is the reason that *Christianity for the Rest of Us* and other books that point to exceptional congregations are largely irrelevant (Bass 2006). Indeed, some congregations *do* have amazing, transcendent worship (with all sorts of “Durkheimian effervescence” and “Collinsian entrainment”), but such congregations are the exception to the rule. The typical congregation has adequate worship that speaks primarily to persons who grew up immersed in the church. It is dependent on support from a community that does not evaluate it on its own merits, but rather on it being *their* church, in *their* community.

Because American congregations are on their own, to sink or swim so to speak, they are very concerned about their own health and vitality. The evangelical imperative calls them to incorporate and perfect the unchurched population in their midst, but they are also concerned about being viable organizations (small businesses). For those with paid clergy and staff, salary and benefit issues are increasingly problematic. Religious giving as a percentage of income has dropped, and the IRS no longer allows people to deduct cash contributions without receipts.

In order to be competitive and viable, congregations adopt various strategies in order to attract more people. Some of these strategies, while successful in drawing people in and even in creating successful interaction rituals, cannot be considered religious—but rather sentimentality and psychological techniques of emotional arousal. Secular methods are used in the hopes of attracting more people, because the impulse is to gather them in and because they are needed to keep the religious community viable.

Bryan Wilson has been castigated by many for suggesting that one reason that American religion is successful is because American churches are secularized. To his detractors, Wilson was grasping at straws to impose the secularization thesis on America, rather than making an observation as an outsider about the character of churches in America in contrast to churches and religious organizations outside the United States. Yet we have to ask if a religious ritual so fully incorporates non-religious elements that it appears rather non-religious, does it remain a religious ritual, even if it is “inspiring,” fun and thereby successful? There are many successful, inspiring rituals in which people can participate. Go to an SEC football game at Florida, Auburn, Alabama, LSU, etc. if you want to get “religion” in a non-religious setting. I didn’t even go to Auburn and I try to resist the effect of their ritual manipulation, but I nevertheless get chills and misty-eyed when the golden eagle soars around the stadium and the team emerges through a mist of dry ice vapor amidst deafening roars from the crowd and triumphant music from the PA system. Such rituals have been called “quasi-religious” in the sense that they lead to the same kind of emotions as successful religious rituals, but the key element is that they are successful in creating Durkheimian effervescence. That experience may seem somehow “religious,” but it doesn’t mediate the sacred. The churches have learned from football games and rock concerts in their efforts to craft successful rituals. These rituals and the churches that house them attract people because the rit-

uals are appealing. But that does not mean that they retain much religion. And in replacing religious rituals with secular rituals, the churches have become secularized as Wilson maintained.

So does it matter for the state of religion in America that *most of the successful rituals are secular* rather than religious and that *most of the unsuccessful rituals retain their religious character*? I would argue that the character of religious rituals is critical. To the extent that rituals are less religious, they will be less successful in creating a population that retains religious sensitivity, religious tools, and religious symbols. The religious character of a congregationally-based system is dependent on the viability and religious character of its congregations, and *to the extent that those congregations are not viable and/or not religious affects the religious character of the population*. Further, the use of secular rituals to prop up religious rituals is only helpful for those who want their religious rituals to be more engaging, but in making them more secular the congregation necessarily comes in competition with purely secular rituals outside the congregation. The current generation of church-goers may appreciate adding a little (secular) effervescent “oomph” to a religious ritual, but *they understand the religious ritual that is being adapted*. The next generation may only appreciate the secular aspect of the ritual and realize that they can get it better elsewhere.

The decline in the dualistic, enchanted universe in which ambient religion flourishes is apparent. It cannot be denied that the pervasiveness of religion in modern life has been reduced and segmented. Religious institutions have less power, religious leaders have less respect, people engage in less religious discourse as a part of everyday life, and in general people are less likely to see the world as actively populated and controlled by powerful benevolent, benign, capricious, or vindictive spiritual forces.

Robert Wuthnow (1988:4) famously observed in *The Restructuring of American Religion* that there are no more Sunday school parades. Public religious events that were once attended by mayors, governors, and even members of the Supreme Court are a thing of the past, dying out by the late 1950s, according to Wuthnow. But the truth about the Sunday school parade is even worse than its prematurely recorded death: the parade is still held in New York, and school is cancelled throughout the five boroughs presumably so students can attend.<sup>3</sup> But the meaning and history of Anniversary Day are lost to the vast majority of New Yorkers, and most do not know why children do not have to go to school that day.

Religion is almost totally absent from the public square in the United States. Furthermore, few people use religious language in casual speech, letters or emails, by and large. Blue laws are nearly a thing of the past. *Sunday morning is not sacred time because the church is no longer sacred to the larger community*. Going to church is a leisure activity that must compete with other leisure activities within the service sector of the economy. Religion has become a commodity that some people enjoy consuming and others do not. And this is the only reason that religion is (and can be) analyzed as a commodity by purveyors of “rational choice” theory.

To the extent that we still have ambient religion, it is the residue, the fluff, given off by people who have been around religious “cats” for most of their lives. That is, the religious character of a community is created by the people who are religiously observant in congregations—if there are enough of them. Thus, it is acceptable in the South for a person in the secular media to mention his or her church in passing, whereas in other parts of the nation, doing so would be seen as odd and intrusive.

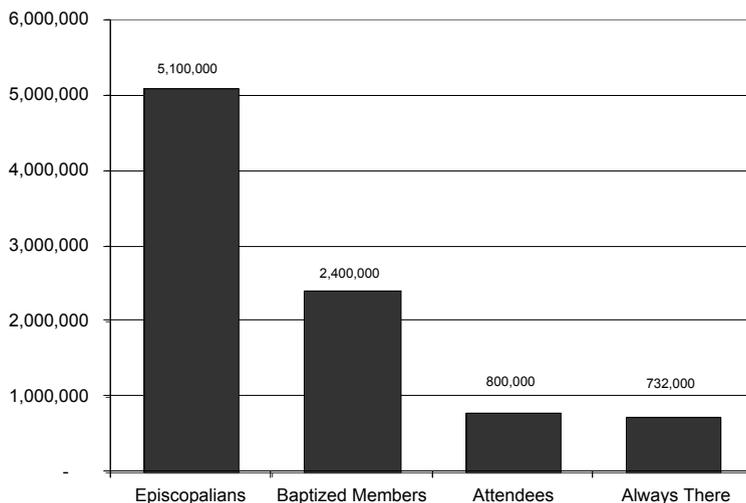
### BEING THERE (OR NOT)

Congregations that do not want to be part of the service sector, but act as if they are settled parishes, are in the greatest trouble. They persist in providing rituals for a settled religious population amidst a population that is less settled and less religious in terms of world view. To a greater and greater extent, that community is composed of middle aged and elderly Americans, and it is always the same people who are there each week.

At an unspeakably bad worship service that I attended recently, I found the answer to a question that was troubling me: “Why does anyone attend these things?” After the service (which started 15 minutes late and which featured extreme Anglo-Catholic liturgy, folksy hymns, a meaningless homily, and confusion among several new acolytes), an elderly woman said to me, “wasn’t that service just *wonderful*, but then, doesn’t Father X always do a great job?” I lied, and said “oh yes,” smiling in a sincere Southern way. For this woman and for the other elderly, odd and long-term members who make up this congregation, the service *was* good. It was *her church* and her priest, doing what was expected, and she is there every week.

Based on poll data, we know that churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious congregations contain a set of core members and a larger number of people who attend less often. But if you pay attention, you realize that for the most part it is the same people who are there *every week*. The US Congregational Life Survey, which was administered during worship services in several hundred congregations in 2001 to over 300,000 respondents, revealed that 91% of those who were there said they attended that church or synagogue 2 or 3 times a month or more (Woolever and Bruce 2002). In a similar survey of 41,000 Episcopal attendees, 92% said they attended that church 2 or 3 times a month or more. In any worship service, less than 10% of the people there will be visitors or people who attend once a month or less.

**Figure 2: Being There (or not): Episcopalians and Worship Involvement**

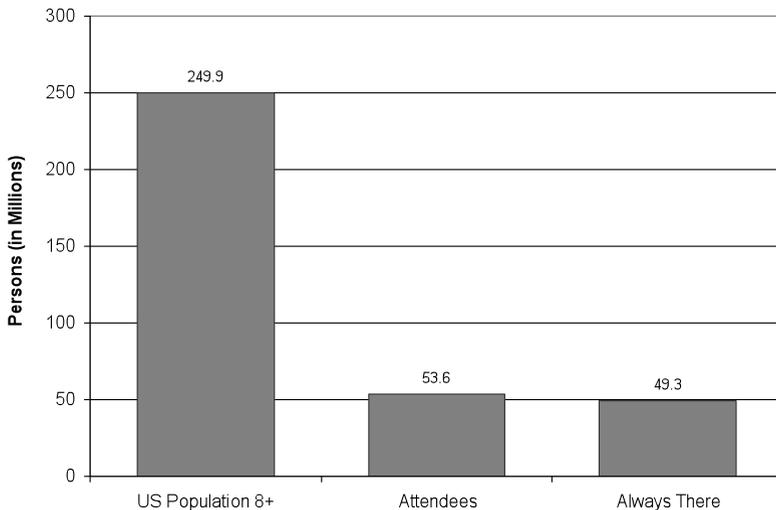


It is also possible to calculate the percentage of people who are likely to be found in worship using the National Opinion Research Center’s *General Social Survey* by weighting people on the odds that they will actually be in attendance (Davis and Smith 2006). Using such a weighting indicates that 92.6% of those who are there at a given service attend 2 or 3 times a week or more. Again, almost all of the people who are there are always there.

What does this mean in terms of those who are *not* there? First and foremost, there are a lot of them. Let’s use Episcopalians as an example. Based on national survey data, around 1.7% of Americans say they are Episcopalians or Anglicans, which indicates that there are around 5.1 million Episcopalians in America. The Episcopal Church baptizes and counts infants, so all of those people could be members. But only around 2.4 million are members—including members of “Anglican” dissident and break-off groups. How many people attend Episcopal and Anglican churches? Only around 800,000 attend on an average weekend—or 34% of membership and 16% of all adherents. Now if 92% of those who are there on a typical Sunday are always or nearly always there, that means that the 3.1 million Episcopalians who say they attend once a month or less are represented by only 68,000 persons actually attending.

I realize that Episcopalians are not representative of the national population—but I do believe that these results are indicative of the situation nationally. A few years ago Penny Marler and I published an article in which we were able to estimate the number of religious congregations in America using data from Mark Chaves’ National Congregational Life study and a little algebra (Chaves *et al.* 1999; Hadaway and Marler 2005). If you know the number of mainline and Catholic churches and you also know the proportion these churches represent out of all congregations, you can solve for X to get the total number of congregations. That number in 2000 was 331,000. Furthermore, if you know the total worship attendance

**Figure 3: Being There (or not): The U.S. Population and Worship Involvement**



Source: *The General Social Survey* (Davis and Smith 2006).

for most denominations in each religious family, you can estimate the average attendance per congregation and multiply that figure by the total number of congregations in each denominational family—thus giving an estimate of the number of Americans who can be found attending worship each week.

As can be seen in Figure 3, around 53 million persons over the age of 8 can be expected to be found worshipping in religious services during an average week. And if we assume that 92% of those people are always or almost always there, that leaves only 4.3 million persons who represent the approximately 150 million Americans who say they attend worship once a month or less.<sup>4</sup>

So what does this mean? The same people are always or nearly always in worship. There are not that many of them, and they are considerably older than the general population. Most people are only sporadically in worship and thus cannot really be part of religious communities. And if participation in religious rituals as part of a religious community is significant to being a religious person, then we can legitimately question the religious nature of the American population. They may retain a generalized belief in God and some residue of past religious involvement, but without being there they are left with a form of Moralistic-Therapeutic Deism (MJD)—“a benign and relatively undemanding form of Christianity, noticeably content-light” (Smith 2005; Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008:117).<sup>5</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

If the same people are attending religious congregations, then few people are being exposed to and formed by religious rituals and congregational involvement. To the extent that the rituals are either unsuccessful or increasingly non-religious, the impact of those rituals is necessarily diminished—thus having serious long-term consequences for religion in nations with congregationally-based religious systems. Furthermore, because of economic and social viability issues, more and more congregations will fail and others will persist only as marginal institutions that get by via low overhead (accomplished through part-time or volunteer leaders and inherited or alternative-use facilities, such as homes, schools, store-fronts, etc.).

In this context the only truly viable economic model for a religious organization is the mega-church. But because few clergy have the skills to create them and there is no intentional way for denominations to grow them, they are few in number. They also epitomize the drift toward using essentially secular rituals to energize the ritual environment. There is an old joke that the Unitarian Universalist Church is a half-way house for atheists who haven't kicked the church habit. Perhaps mega-churches provide a place people can enjoy a good show and assuage their guilt over going to church without actually having done so.

Despite the advent of the Emergent Church, Second Life Churches, Third Space Churches, and other less-congregational forms, there do not seem to be viable alternatives to the congregation as the primary home for religious ritual and religious community formation in the United States. Consequently, the national religious fluff is not being replenished by active intrusive cats and continues to settle. And yet the evangelical imperative continues and may become more urgent as American society begins to seem as irreligious as it already is. Maybe then the polls and rolls will begin to match more than they do now. If so, then we can expect more calls to action and hands wrung over religious declines among our youth. We see a bit of this in Robert Wuthnow's (2007) *After the Baby Boomers*. The results of Christian Smith's (2005) *Soul Searching* on religion among teenagers actually seem more troubling for America's religious institutions than Wuthnow's, but instead of hand-wringing or calls for action

Smith seems to suggest that the current level of irreligion is not surprising. And maybe it shouldn't be, because it is among youth and young adults that religious trends first become apparent. We have known for years that youth and young adults were beginning to absent themselves from congregations. Their absence is finally turning up in social surveys. And some people are finally worried.

The overall level of ambient religion in society as measured by opinion polls is not the point. The evangelical imperative and the attendant imperative of sectarian perfectionism have caused religious leaders and sociologists to see national and personal religion on a sliding scale. The key question is not how religious are Americans, but how viable are our religious communities and the religious rituals that they perform. Fluff doesn't form, nor does it congeal into kittens or cats.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>An interesting recent twist is to describe Europe as the exception in its secularity rather than America in its religiosity (Davie 2002; Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008:10). Given the variations in religious activity in Europe and the recent secularity of Australia and large sections of Canada, the argument for Europe as the exception seems a bit strained.

<sup>2</sup>The Eastern Seaboard was unpopulated by European standards. There is evidence that the New England area was heavily populated by Native Americans prior to the establishment of permanent settlements by Europeans, but that population was devastated by disease (through earlier contact with European traders) creating a de-populated territory of abandoned villages and decimated tribes.

<sup>3</sup>To be honest, in my actual lecture, I presumed that Wuthnow was correct about the demise of the Sunday school parade. Mark Chaves mentioned to me afterwards that he had marched in the parade as a child in Queens after the 1950s and that as far as he knew they still held it. I subsequently learned that it is still held in Queens and Brooklyn, but that all students in New York get the day off (teachers don't). The religious roots of the holiday are downplayed by the city and much like Evacuation Day in certain parts of Massachusetts, most people do not know (or seem to care) why they get a day off.

<sup>4</sup>Overall, in 2006 60.2% of the Americans say they attend worship services once a month or less, according to the General Social Survey (Davis and Smith 2006). The estimate of 150 million sporadic attendees is based on computing 60.2% out of the population of persons age 8+.

<sup>5</sup>Also see Mencken, Bader, and Stark (2008:202) regarding the effects of church attendance on generalized non-traditional supernaturalism.

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