

1. Things Have Changed, or “Toto, We’re Not in Kansas Any More”

Over the last years all of us have watched the geography of the American church undergo a radical transformation. It’s almost as if there has been a major earthquake—or, more accurately, a series of major earthquakes—realigning the entire landscape in which we live. It reminds me of pictures of the San Andreas Fault in California. On the west side of the fault line you can see an outcropping of rocks coming down the hill. On the east side of the line you see the rock ridge continuing on its way back up the other hill. The trouble is, the ridge on the east side is about a hundred yards further south from the one on the west—the entire land mass has rearranged itself. That’s what many of us see as we look around American society today.



Religion in America Fifty Years Ago

I wasn’t an adult in the 1950s, so I can’t speak from experience about the church in the post-war, Eisenhower era. But I can point you to a fantastic description of American religious life in the 1950s in the classic study by Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. In the vast majority of the communities that Herberg studied, people’s Christian or Jewish identity was one of the very top items on their identity checklist. It stood up there with their patriotic identity as Americans (in fact, as in our day, the two were frequently confused with each other!). Especially if you lived in a smaller town, you would very likely have attended the same church that your parents had attended. Probably you would have been baptized and married in the same church, and you expected your funeral service to take place there in due course.

Not only that, but you would have shared most of your fundamental values in common with the others in your congregation. Since the vast majority of Americans were either Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Jewish there was a remarkable degree of consensus, and thus a relatively small range of choice. Your church or synagogue taught and reinforced your core values about faith, sex, family, politics—you name it. It was also the center of your social world. Two or three times a week Christians came to church to be together with other church people. Church social events stood at the center of your social life, and your life partner (for that's what marriages were expected to produce in those days) was very likely drawn from your broader church community.

Thus Herberg could write in 1955 that, "Almost everybody in the United States today locates himself in one of the three great religious communities. Asked to identify themselves in terms of religious 'preferences,' 95 per cent of the American people, according to a recent public opinion survey, declared themselves to be either Protestants, Catholics, or Jews."¹ It was not a great decade for free thinkers:

Through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth America knew the militant secularists, the atheist or "free-thinker," as a familiar figure in cultural life, along with the considerably larger numbers of agnostics who would have nothing to do with churches and refused to identify themselves religiously. These still exist, of course, but their ranks are dwindling and they are becoming more and more inconspicuous, taking the American people as a whole. The "village atheist" is a vanishing figure; Clarence Darrow and Bran the Iconoclast, who once commanded large and excited audiences, have left no successors. Indeed, their kind of anti-religion is virtually meaningless to most Americans today, who simply cannot understand how one can be "against religion" and for whom some sort of religious identification is more or less a matter of course.²

Herberg's data showed that church membership was growing twice as fast as the American population was. It was the Golden Age for the American church. But it was not to last long.



The '60s and '70s

We know the 1960s as a time of radical change, when huge transformations in beliefs and values began to take place. What is interesting about the early 1960s, however, is that, although values did begin to change, Christian and

Jewish communities continued to provide the primary point of orientation for most people. It was a time of revolutionary (and often confusing) transition within American culture, and yet for a long time people continued their high levels of involvement in churches and synagogues. It was well into the 1970s, or even later, before the cultural changes produced gaps between the people and their congregations, so that they gradually began identifying less with their traditional religious communities.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however—the period when I came of age religiously—there was a wide, almost disorienting range of religious options. My own story was perhaps not untypical for the time: I could continue to attend the mainline Presbyterian church that had been my church home since elementary school. I could attend an evangelical Bible study group associated with one of the evangelical churches in my area. I could attend a charismatic prayer meeting once a week, affiliated with a Pentecostal church. I could actually start attending the Assemblies of God church. Or I could make a community of “Jesus People” my Christian home, becoming a part of what would later be called the non-denominational or independent church movement. (In fact, over time I tried *all* these options—as many others were also doing.)

Having all these options to decide from was way more confusing than if I had been living in Ames, Iowa, or Bakersfield, California, in the 1950s! Still, note one feature of this choice: *all of these options were options in organized religion*. The option, “spiritual but not religious,” was just beginning to appear on the map of American religious choice, but it involved at that time only a small percentage of the American public. In the early 1970s most of our real religious options were still “institutional” options.



American Religion in the Early Twenty-First Century

Now fast forward to today. Surveys funded by the Pew Charitable Trust indicate an ever-increasing number of Americans are stepping outside of institutional religion altogether. You are probably already familiar with the steady decrease in membership in mainline churches. But did you know that, according to a recent U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, “the United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country”? According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, only 51 percent of Americans still report that they are members of Protestant denominations.³ Evangelical

Protestant churches, together with historically black Protestant churches, make up 33.2 percent of the overall adult population, whereas mainline Protestant churches now represent only 18.1 percent of that population (5). Moreover, the “graying” of the mainline continues; roughly half the members of mainline churches are age fifty and older (9).

The 2008 Pew report also points out a new pattern: “the proportion of the population that is Protestant has declined markedly in recent decades while the proportion of the population *that is not affiliated with any particular religion* has increased significantly” (18, emphasis added). Throughout the period of the ’70s and ’80s, a constant 60 to 65 percent of respondents identified themselves as Protestant. The early ’90s began a period of steady decline. By 2006 both the Pew survey and the General Social Surveys (GSS) found Protestant affiliation down to roughly 50 percent. Most of the overall decline is due to the rapid membership drop in the mainline churches. The Pew report notes, “What scholars who have analyzed the GSS data have found is that the proportion of the population identifying with the large mainline Protestant denominations has declined significantly in recent decades, while the proportion of Protestants identifying with the large evangelical denominations has increased” (18).

But the evangelical churches haven’t been shielded from losses either. The publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, LifeWay Christian Resources, reported recently that in 2007 “the number of people baptized in Southern Baptist churches fell for the third straight year,” reaching “the denomination’s lowest level since 1987,” and “total membership dropped by nearly 40,000.” In 2007 alone baptisms dropped nearly 5.5 percent.⁴ Similar losses in other evangelical denominations are viewed with serious concern among leaders.

The grounds for these declines will occupy us throughout the coming pages. One obvious reason is that the range of religious options and identities has exploded for Americans today. Most of us know friends, colleagues, or acquaintances who are Christian, Jewish, Muslim; Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist; atheist, agnostic, “doubting believers”; pantheist, panentheist, neo-pagan; Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, Church of God; Bahá’í, Zoroastrian, perennialist—the list goes on and on. Faced with such a confusing array of options, more and more Americans are choosing not to choose. They develop “serial religious personalities,” progressing gradually (or not so gradually) through a huge range of religious options, influenced by age, friends, geographic

location, newspapers, or the most recent books they find in the Metaphysics section of their local bookstore. I think a lot of Americans feel like the six-year-old who finally convinces her parents to take her to Baskin-Robbins: it’s so overwhelming to encounter that huge range of flavors that you just can’t decide which one to try. Some try them all; others stop coming.

This bewildering multiplicity of religious (and non-religious) options is only the start for Christianity’s new context. What it means to be church today, and what it will mean over the coming two to three decades, is affected just as strongly by the explosion of new technologies and the radically new forms of social networking that they create. Who could have imagined just ten years ago that millions of people would find their primary social home on a website? That we would spend more time on Facebook than on the phone? That millions of us would find our life partners through eHarmony.com? That the future of Iran would be significantly influenced by Twitter.com? That a president would be elected in no small part because of personal appeals posted on YouTube? First emailing, then texting, now tweeting and other new options are fundamentally transforming our social world. Religious identities by 2020—just a few short years away—will be determined by technologies that we can’t even begin to imagine today.

Consider the role of Beliefnet.com. This amazing website and social networking center is now the go-to place for millions of Americans when they want to learn about religion, post personal thoughts and responses, or find religious community. Pastors and religious authorities no longer interpret the religious options for most Americans today, whether or not they still attend a church or synagogue; websites do. We can learn anything—and proclaim anything—directly on the Internet. If you are unsure about your religious identity, for example, just try the “Belief-O-Matic” function at Beliefnet.com. As the opening blurb proclaims:

Even if YOU don’t know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic™ knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic™ will tell you what religion (if any) you practice . . . or ought to consider practicing. . . . (Warning: Belief-O-Matic™ assumes no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul.)⁵

No wonder people feel a little strange participating in a social arrangement called the “local congregation,” a structure designed for the world of the eighteenth century, before there were cars or even light bulbs!