

# American Religion's Mega-Trends: Gleanings from Forty Years of Research

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One searches for images that encapsulate the changes that have overtaken American religion in the more than two centuries since the founding of the republic, and that might assist in interpreting the abundance of data surfacing day-by-day about different trends in American religious practice, not to mention getting a handle on that increasingly important desire to discern the future of both religion in general and different religious communities in particular. In that regard, we pose the further question about the relevance of history in our approach to the present.

From a historical perspective, the most important questions about American religion focus on Christianity, for most decades the story of American religion has been the story of the Christian church's development and the generation of its many denominational expressions. *Without a doubt, the most significant changes have occurred within and around the Christian community—including its appropriation as the majority religious expression of the Native American and African American communities. Over the several centuries from the 1790s to the present, it moved from being a relatively small minority community but without any significant competitors, to being the overwhelmingly majority community but now possessed of a number of significant competitors in the religious market place* representing the broad spectrum of the world's religions, not to mention an active and vocal community of Unbelief—skeptics, Humanists, atheists.<sup>1</sup>

When the dust settled from the American Revolution, and the churches were disestablished, only a tiny minority of the population, between ten and fifteen percent, remained formally associated with the churches. And the churches themselves were in a weakened state. Many of the ministers, including the majority of Anglican and Methodists, returned to England as hostilities developed, and the quality of those that remained was often in question. We must read the stories of the believers from this era as accounts of the faithful few who were operating amid neighbors who were largely disconnected from Christianity and who manifested a lack of concern with religion in general.

What we generally term the Second Great Awakening, a misnomer at best, was a great evangelistic endeavor designed more or less consciously to reach out to the manifest non-religious and bring them into the fold. Those churches that most clearly saw the irreligion of the country and engaged in the effort reaped the harvest. From that time to the present the growth of the churches decade-by-decade depended on two factors—evangelism/church membership recruitment (in its many forms) and immigration. Among the English-speaking, the more evangelistically minded churches reached out and grew steadily through the centuries. Many of the non-English speaking immigrants flocked to the churches they had known back home—most notably Lutheran and Catholic—which served as a haven in a foreign land.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the efforts at evangelism and church recruitment seemed to have born significant fruit and the churches were in a state of relative prosperity. Church membership had grown significantly. It had only reached 30 to 35 percent, still well below fifty percent, but church leaders could see the gap closing. Equally important was population growth. The country had moved from around 4 million to 75 million, and from 13 states along the Atlantic coast to 48 states that reached across the continent. In absolute numbers, church membership had grown from around half a million to 25 million.

For the churches, beginning the new century, the future was bright. They had placed bases of operation in every community and had a clear vision of the goal before them. At the same time, one could begin to perceive forces of change. Though nothing to shake the sense that Christianity was moving into a dominant position of power in the culture, the first signs of future religious diversity had begun appear. The esoterically minded had formed a popular Spiritualist movement. There were Theosophists, Christian Scientists, and the initial centers of what would become the New Thought movement. Though few did any counting, there were now over 300 Christian

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<sup>1</sup> This paper summarizes data accumulated over the last forty years by the Institute for the Study of American Religion, a religious studies research facility based in Santa Barbara, California. For a more complete presentation of the data upon which this paper draws, see the various editions of the *Encyclopedia of American Religion*, the most recent (8<sup>th</sup>) edition released as *Melton's Encyclopedia of America Religion* (Detroit: Cengage, 2009); *Nelson's Guide to Denominations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007); and *American Religion: An Illustrated History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000). All are by J. Gordon Melton.

denominations, a few of which were successfully challenging the core of trinitarian Christian orthodoxy that defined the mainstream churches, most notably the several Latter-day Saint groups, the Bible Students led by Pastor Charles Taze Russell (later to transform into the Jehovah's Witnesses), the Unitarians, and the Universalists.

Then right at the end of the century, some creative Protestant leaders tried out a new format for missionary work—dialogue with leaders of the world's religious traditions that would engage them in the Christian worldview. To that end, they organized the first Parliament of the World's Religions, held over some six weeks in Chicago in the summer of 1893. The effort backfired, however, and the primary result of the parliament was the founding of the first English-speaking centers of Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities.

At the same time, a whole new set of voices that offered a quite contrary perspective to the optimism of American church leaders had arisen among the European intelligentsia. These new voices, admittedly speaking out of the European context and largely unfamiliar with the situation in America, were suggesting that religion was in a severely wounded condition and prophesied that its visible decline would be the story of the twentieth century. These voices included some of the most quoted observers of human society in the new century—social analyst Karl Marx (1883), pioneering sociologists Emil Durkheim (1858-1913) and Max Weber (1864-1920), psychotherapist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and biologist Charles Darwin (1809-1882). They saw the dominant European churches take a number of very visible hits as church establishments were being dismantled, most notably in France and Italy.

Early in the twentieth century, numerous American scholars as they absorbed the guiding perspectives in their field of study abandoned of any idea of a continuing significant role for religion in Western culture. As late as the 1970s, most social scientists were still telling a version of the secularization story. Few had any picture of what was occurring around them or were prepared for what was now about to occur.

The emergence of a new view of the world from the study of biological evolution (and geological processes) was seen as an attack on the literal understanding of the Bible narrative, especially the book of Genesis. If one destroyed the idea of a literal Garden of Eden, global flood, and Exodus miracles, could the destruction of the whole Christian worldview be far behind? Simultaneously, sociologists suggested that as religion was wrenched from its place of power in the political social structure, it would lose its social relevance and become merely a personal fantasy for the less educated. Freud's opinion of religion, now that psychotherapy had created a new map of the subconscious, was summarized in his book, *The Future of an Illusion*.

While the older state churches were leading a seeming decline of religion across Europe, however, in America religion continued to grow well ahead of population growth, but found itself embattled. The wealth of European ideas quickly found their way across the ocean into the halls of learning, including the churches' seminaries. The larger denominations were all, at various levels, fighting about how to respond to the new intellectual currents. One group of professors, slowly gaining the upper hand, advocated a more positive response to the plethora of new ideas. They suggested that the new perspectives could be appropriated and turned to good use by the church. While the new approach to the first books of the Bible certainly altered the way religious people saw biblical history, it did not destroy Christianity. They suggested that God operated through the evolutionary processes to create His world. The early books of the Bible could best be understood as Hebrew myths, stories that possibly lacked literal truth but which nevertheless conveyed true ideas about the nature of humanity and its relationship with divine realities.

As they absorbed new understandings of social processes, Christian social thinkers suggested that sociological insights could be used to bring in the Kingdom of God on Earth, a more just and loving society. Usually their suggestions took shape in some form of socialism. They called it the Social Gospel and launched a new era of religious activism at the legislative level with calls for society to respond to its social problems.

Still other thinkers saw the exploration of the human psyche as uncovering truths that spiritual perspectives on the individual had earlier highlighted. New psychological tools could aid the spiritual life, shed new life on spiritual conflict. Pioneers in what would become known as pastoral counseling would arise to bring

psychological insights into the pastor's office and make ministers more proficient in responding to the concerns of parishioners.

This Modernist approach gained ground in the generation prior to World War I and became the dominant approach among scholars associated with most of the larger Protestant churches by 1920. But not all agreed. A large group of religious scholars saw the Modernist camp as abandoning the tradition. These more conservative thinkers chose to reject the new intellectual trends. In their opinion, the Bible was true in both a spiritual and secular sense, the more familiar theological approach was basically sound, and biology and geology were misinterpreting the data they had unearthed. The traditional thrust of the church toward individuals rather than society as a whole was still the better option to change the world. Religion was not an illusion, psychology was. These traditionalists took their stand on what they saw as the fundamentals of Christian faith and branded the Modernists as heretics. In the decades between the World Wars, these Fundamentalists fought the Modernists for control of the major denominations. In the 1930s, the Fundamentalists lost major battles in the Presbyterian and Northern Baptist churches.

The Fundamentalists withdrew, and some voiced their anger at being pushed aside and reduced to an increasingly marginalized minority. Not recognized at the time, the more important group, the Evangelicals formed a coalition of conservatives among the many who stayed in the larger denominations, those who left, and those who had formed conservative denominations in the nineteenth century. This Evangelical coalition began quietly to rebuild all they had lost—the needed seminaries, a fresh leadership, and a means of by-passing the large denominations and reaching the public directly. They founded a new seminary, named for radio evangelist Charles Fuller, in Pasadena, California. They found a new leader in evangelist Billy Graham, and discovered the means of reaching the public through radio and television. By the 1970s they had rebuilt and were ready to reassert their presence in American religion. Some of their new denominations had grown large, and one that never fell into the modernist camp, the Southern Baptist Convention, had become the largest Protestant denomination in America. At the same time, they could claim significant minorities in many of the large Liberal (Modernist) Protestant churches.

As late as the 1970s, most social scientists were still telling the secularization story. It seemed clearly evident in Europe. In Eastern Europe the state churches had been dismantled by anti-religious governments, and in Western Europe, the state churches were losing public support decade by decade. The European decline seemed to be manifesting in America where the mainline Protestant churches were having their problems with slowing growth rates, a leveling off, and then an actual decline in membership. The Jewish community remained a 50-50 situation, with only half of the community attached to a synagogue. Evolutionary theory seemed relatively unchallenged, and psychotherapy had developed a massive presence. The more secularly minded were to be quite surprised by the vitality that religion was demonstrating.

As we come closer to the present in our survey of American Religion we must make note of the somewhat limited databases with which scholars were often working. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Department of Commerce had gathered data on religion and each decade published its summary as the U.S. Census of religion. The last of these appeared in 1936, future government-sponsored data gathering and reports being stopped in the face of challenges based on separation of church and state.<sup>2</sup> The work of reporting on the development of religious groups fell to the Federal Council of Churches (superseded in 1950 by the National Council of Churches), which began issuing an expanded council membership handbook as the *Yearbook of American Churches*. While providing vital information on most (but not all) of the larger American churches, the *Yearbook* limited its coverage to groups of which, on the one hand, it could approve and, on the other, which would report to it. Of the more than 400 denominations operating in America in the 1930s, however, it reported on less than 150. By the 1970s, the number of groups included in the *Yearbook* had grown slowly to around 200, mostly Christian denominations, while in the meantime more than 300 new denominations had formed. While aware of the crisis that was developing in the churches that made up the councils' membership, the *Yearbook*

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<sup>2</sup> Religious Bodies, 1936 (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Commerce/Bureau of the Census, 1936): 3 vols.

largely missed the growth that was taking place in the “other” Christian churches and that was just beginning to occur outside of the Christian community.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile several of the research offices of some of the larger denominations began to gather data for what emerged as a decade by decade census, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*.<sup>4</sup> This otherwise extremely important report, however, was again limited to less than 150 Christian denominations and Jewish synagogue associations.<sup>5</sup>

Most recently, a variety of national religious polls have offered snapshots of the religious profile of the nation. The value of these data sets has been increased by their publication on the Internet. They are best at describing the larger religious communities but suffer from a relative lack of interest in and a relative lack of knowledge of the peculiarities of the very diverse smaller religious communities.<sup>6</sup>

It was to address the issues posed by the existence of the many ignored American religions, that the Institute for the Study of American Religion (ISAR) was founded in 1968. A decade of data gathering led to the original 1979 publication of the *Encyclopedia of American Religion*, which was seen as an initial report calling attention in a systematic way to all of the religious bodies then known to be operating in the United States. By that time not only were there a number of large religious groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, that were being ignored in the standard data gathering processes, but we were becoming increasingly aware that as a result of changes in the immigration laws in 1965, that the United States was experiencing a quantum leap in religious pluralism.

If we look at the big picture, the story of religion in the United States from the Revolution to the end of World War II, is basically the story of the development of the Christian community into the majority faith of the American public. It is during World War II that the churches first report a combined membership that includes 50 percent of the public. The Christian community now included some 66 million people. It continued to enjoy an upward climb into the 1960s, where it hit some 70 percent. With the population increase, that meant that church membership almost doubled in the two decades after the war. Today membership has increased to about 75 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup>

During this period, groups representing other religious traditions were also present. The first Swedenborgians arrived in the 1790s. Spiritualists and Latter-day Saints were present from the 1830s. Theosophists and Christian Scientists emerged in the 1870s. Muslims were present among the slaves and the first Buddhists arrived during the California gold rush. Hinduism was initially established after the 1893 Parliament. Until the 1960s, these groups were largely treated as fringe phenomena—with some justification. Apart from the Christian community, the only religious tradition of note was Judaism which had grown by immigration from a total Jewish population of some 1,500 in 1790, to 280,000 (1880) to 4.5 million by the mid 1920s. It has grown very slowly in the years since.

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<sup>3</sup> The number of religious bodies reported on by the yearbook of American Churches has varied from year to year, but continues to hover at a little above 200. The 2008 YAC reported on only some 225 of the more than 1000 Christian denominations in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> As Jewish synagogues and other religions were added to the effort, the report was retitled as *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dale E. Jones et al, *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States 2000* (Nashville, TN: Glenmary Research Center, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> The surveys include the American Religious Identification Surveys for 1990, 2001, and 2008 (Accessed at <http://prog.trincoll.edu/ISSSC/DataArchive/index.asp>); the Baylor Religion Survey whose findings were published in *What Americans Really Believe* by Dr. Rodney Stark (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008); and the 2007 Pew Forum's U. S. Religious Landscape Survey (posted at <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>).

<sup>7</sup> The figures quoted here are drawn from the most edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Religion* (Detroit: Cengage, 2009), using data compiled from canvassing the 2000 presently existing religious groups in 2008. It roughly conforms to data released from the Pew Forum's "U.S. Religious landscape Survey" and posted at <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>.



*So, what happened in 1965 to alter the storyline?* In the generation prior to World War I, population growth included immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—Italy, Poland, Russia, etc.—while on the West Coast an increasing number of Asians—Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Indians—arrived. Opposition to immigration from these areas grew around a number of issues from religion to race and coalesced in the 1924 legislation that blocked immigration from other than Northern and Western Europe. However, as the 1960s began, the United States was involved in a war in Viet Nam and seeking assistance from Asian allies. Part of the price for gaining their support was an end to the immigration restrictions imposed in 1924, and the insult such restrictions implied. The new immigration bill placed Asian countries on the same immigration quotas as the Western European nations. Due primarily to this change in immigration law, the miniscule Asian and Middle Eastern religious communities, which included the whole spectrum of the world's religions from Advaita Hinduism to Zoroastrianism, began to grow at an unprecedented rate. This growth initially impacted the West Coast and several large metropolitan complexes (New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Houston), but by the 1990s, it was visible in urban areas across the United States.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time that the Asian and Middle Eastern traditions started growing, the West's third religious tradition found multiple openings. What we called the New Age Movement in the 1970s and 1980s, resulted in a monumental revival of that diverse decentralized movement that in past generations we called the "occult," but which is now generally termed the Western Esoteric tradition.<sup>9</sup> The modern revival of Esoteric religion begins in Germany in the seventeenth century in the form of Rosicrucianism and then blossomed in the speculative Freemasonry of the eighteenth century. Freemasonry, in turn, gave birth to Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, and a variety of magical schools in the nineteenth century. A more mystical form of Esotericism would emerge as Christian Science and New Thought, with the most noteworthy new branch of Esotericism in the twentieth century being the Neo-Pagan/Wiccan movement. Each of these movements would take on a variety of organizational forms, and although few attained any size (Christian Science being one of the few that counted members in the hundreds of thousands), their combined impact has been considerable. Today the number of adherents of Esotericism in the United States is greater than the combined adherents of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam all together.

The growth of religion on every front has reshaped American religion. The country is now home to all of the world's major religious traditions, each of which has been able to form one or more national associations of centers. The large traditions were able to organize pan-denominational associations that moved to normalize the religion's presence in the secular culture and the political community. By the end of the twentieth century, even smaller newer religious groups, such as the neo-Pagan/Wiccan community, could project a future of participation in the religious world as a substantive minority voice.

The spectacular rise of different religious groups in the United States in the last generation could easily suggest the imminent arrival of a new religious establishment, one that would displace and supersede the dominant role formerly served by Christianity, however, no such possibility has appeared on the horizon. *The emergence of the new religious traditions in America has, as a whole, not come at the expense of Christianity, nor has Christianity stopped growing.* Rather, both have continued to whittle away at the still large community of the religiously unaffiliated and both have continued to claim some from the new people that appear in the recruitment pool year by year. Between 1980 and 2000, for example, we added 55 million people to the population. We added another 30 million this decade alone. Current projections suggest that we will add almost 40 million in the decade ahead.

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<sup>8</sup> Further changes in the immigration law in the early 1990s during the first Bush administration substantially increased the number of Asian admitted annually into the United States.

<sup>9</sup> Esotericism exists as a third religious tradition beside Christianity and Judaism over the last two millennia. It originates with Gnosticism and includes such movements as Manicheanism, the bogomils, the Albigensians, and the Cabalists. For more detail on the tradition see Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000); Joycelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

The point being that *all of the religious groups have been able to continue their growth simultaneously, the growth of one not dependent on the decline of the other.*

*The single most significant trend in American religion from 1900 to the present has been the steady and spectacular decline in the percentage of religiously unaffiliated people in the American population. In 1900, the religiously unaffiliated included some 65 percent of the population. That figure has now dropped to around 15 percent. That trend underlies a host of additional observations.*

### **The Persistence of Denominations**

Through the 1960s, in the wake of the founding of the World Council of Churches (1948) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the United States participated in a growing wave of ecumenical enthusiasm that appears to have swept through the Christian world. During the era of good feeling that grew from the very real accomplishments of Catholic-Protestant-Orthodox dialogue, a forward-looking group of theologians envisioned a united Christian church or at the very least a united Protestant church. Prophetic voices pronounced obsolete the issues that had divided Christendom, and argued that the immediate challenges facing the contemporary churches demanded a united front reoriented around present priorities. Denominations were dysfunctional and Christians should welcome the new post-denominational era.<sup>10</sup>

Plans for church mergers proliferated, and significant mergers culminated in, for example, the emergence of the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Meanwhile a more ambitious project, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) sought to unite Methodists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians into a model united Protestant church. A generation of COCU negotiations crashed against the reality of denominational life, however, and the more utopian vision of ecumenism was reluctantly set aside.

By the 1990s, it had become evident that successful church mergers continued the pattern of mergers from the previous century. They were limited to church bodies that already shared close family attraction. Mergers were possible among denominations from what *The Encyclopedia of American Religion* termed “family groups”—churches that share the same history, the same theological tradition, and a similar polity. Merging groups also had to possess a strong belief that the merger with its loss of prior denominational identity will also produce very real and positive gains.<sup>11</sup>

The attempts to unite across family lines demonstrated that the older denominational issues were still very much alive. It was not that a variety of resolutions to differences in theology and polity were not available, rather negotiators showed an inability to avoid, or in some cases understand, the larger often unspoken implications of the doctrinal and organizational differences. Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians, share a sixteenth century Protestant doctrinal heritage with a high degree of consensus. Methodist bishops resemble Episcopal bishops, and Methodist conferences act very much like presbyteries. With a few notable exceptions, Baptist worship resembles Methodist worship. However, the seemingly slight differences, differences of emphasis, signal very different ways of structuring the Christian life. They provide a different feel to Sunday worship,

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<sup>10</sup> See a statement of this view in Sydney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

<sup>11</sup> As some denominations began to experience a decline in the last third of the twentieth century, observers began to redefine post-denominational prospects in terms of the actual disappearance of these older and larger denominations, generally ignoring the development of a growing number of new denominations. It is yet to be seen how far some of the larger denominations might shrink, much depending on decisions still in the process of being made. For the foreseeable future, however, the place of the larger denominations remains secure. Cf. Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskip, *Chasing Down A Rumor: The Death Of Mainline Denominations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2005); David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman, eds. *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2005); and Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Rickey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

signal different ways of reacting to problem situations, and represent different values relative to such key concerns such as liturgy, piety, and managing a local parish.

Thus, while denominations fell out of popularity in some circles, they persisted as the single stable structure amid all the changes of the last decades of the twentieth century. They remained important in that they are the way that religious life is shaped in a free society. Denominations provide different ways to give form to a larger religious tradition. One cannot, for example, form simply a generic "Christian" church [or Islamic mosque, or Hindu temple, or Jewish synagogue]. A Christian congregation, or association of congregations, has to make a host of decisions that grounds it in the particularity of a Christian life (just as a synagogue or mosque must make basic decisions about Jewish or Islamic life). In Christianity, crucial decisions must, for example, be made about the sacraments. How shall one baptize—immersion, pouring or sprinkling—and who will one baptize—adults only or infants. How many sacraments will one have—seven, three, two, none? Who will be admitted to the sacraments—only adult believers, all baptized Christians, anyone? *While every group is free to decide among the options, it is not free to avoid making a decision.* It is also the case that in making these decisions, the group is also making a set of additional decisions about the nature of the Christian life and how the church relates to society as a whole.

Similarly, one must decide about leadership. Will there be bishops? Will they have an apostolic lineage? Will they have real power? Will they be married? Will they be called bishops? Each decision one makes about episcopal leadership is a simple decision about organization, but carries with it a set of implications about how members will think about the church and its role in the world. If no bishops, will power be placed in the hands of congregations, synods, presbyteries or conferences, or increasingly, a board of directors? Anyone opening a new synagogue or mosque must make similar decisions about the variety of ways one could structure Jewish or Islamic life.

Whatever it calls itself, every new church must make a set of decisions about its beliefs and practices that set it within a denominational tradition (usually that of its founders) or, on very very rare occasions, make it the pioneer of a new denominational family. The older denominational groups persist in that they have found some very workable ways to structure the Christian life and have already experimented with many options that have proved less workable. They have also found more efficient means of serving parishioners and supplying them with a vehicle to express their faith. Thus, while within a free society many different denominations can arise, no one has yet found a better way to provide for the week-in week-out communal life of religious people. They may call "denominations" by different names (Pagan "traditions," Buddhist "sects," Esoteric "currents") but *denominations are the persistent reality of contemporary religion, not just in America, but wherever a high degree of religious freedom prevails.*

### **Pluralism and the New Consensus**

Given the persistence of denominations, the subsequent major reality of American religious life has been its ever-increasing pluralism. The United States was founded with less than twenty different religious communities, all Christian except for the small Jewish community. By 1900, that number had grown to more than 300, again most Christian denominations, but the beginning of a blossoming Esoteric community. By the end of the twentieth century there were more than 2,000, however, now, only about half of the different groups were Christian denominations. At the beginning of twentieth century, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam had just minimally made their presence felt. In the last half of the twentieth century, the number of Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic options represented most forms of the world's religions that were present globally in any strength. In addition there was a host of new uniquely American variations. [There is at present (2010), some 200 Buddhist denominations in America, each defined by the historical community that gave it birth, its theological/liturgical heritage, and its type of leadership.]

*The pluralistic scene means that most anyone, especially any urban dweller, now has almost the full spectrum of the world's religions from which to choose a faith, and one can pursue that faith at any level of commitment from a full-time ordered community to a casual visit on the more important holidays—be it Wesak, Diwali, Rosh Hashannah, Ramadan or the Summer Solstice.*



That being said, there are limits to pluralism. While there are 2000 different religious groups from which Americans can choose, the majority of them have chosen to adhere to one of a mere 23 variations on traditional Christianity. That is to say, when one looks at the 23 largest Christian denominations in the United States, one can find the majority of all religious believers in the country. The list of these larger Christian denominations, each of which reports more than a million adherents, in the United States, include:

Roman Catholic Church	67,200,000 <sup>12</sup>
Southern Baptist Convention	16,400,000
United Methodist Church	8,200,000
The Church of God in Christ	5,400,000
National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.	5,000,000
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	4,900,000
National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.	3,500,000
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	3,200,000
Assemblies of God	2,700,000
African Methodist Episcopal Church	2,500,000
National Missionary Baptist Conv. of America	2,500,000
Progressive National Baptist Convention	2,500,000
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS)	2,400,000
Episcopal Church	2,300,000
Churches of Christ	1,500,000
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America	1,500,000
Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Inc.	1,500,000
American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.	1,400,000
The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	1,400,000
United Church of Christ	1,200,000
Baptist Bible Fellowship International	1,200,000
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	1,000,000
The Orthodox Church in America	1,000,000

These 23 denominations represent the broad spectrum of contemporary Christianity in the West inclusive of the Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox communities. They range from the highly liturgical to those engaged in the most informal of worship, and range from the most conservative (Baptist Bible Fellowship International) to the most liberal (United Church of Christ). While differing on a host of issues, they share some common understandings of the Christian symbols and some boundaries defining who is in and who is outside the Christian community. Together they represent the mainstream of the Christian heritage in America.

In the 1950s, sociologist Will Herberg, out of his observations of post-War American religion, suggested that a new framework for understanding could be found in building a view around three foci, the Protestant, the Catholic, and the Jewish community.<sup>13</sup> At the time, he could not see the Eastern Orthodox community, then possessed of a very low profile, nor could he, of course, be expected to see the changes about to transform America's religious world through the last decades of the twentieth century. His thesis did, however, effectively point to the important role that a few groups have attained, above and beyond the Roman Catholic Church and the several larger Protestant denominations.

Herberg would probably not, for example, have made some of the distinctions that are found within the Christian community. Together the Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox churches recognize each other to a degree as sharing the single Christian tradition. At the same time, these same Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox

<sup>12</sup> The membership figures quoted herein have been rounded off to the nearest 100,000 members. See: Melton, *Nelson's Handbook*, op.cit.

<sup>13</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company. 1955).

churches have deemed some post-Protestant groups<sup>14</sup> as having, to a significant degree, stepped outside the mainstream of that tradition. As such they would not be accepted into ecumenical discussions and the organizations that hold them—the National Council of Churches or the National Association of Evangelicals.

Meanwhile, several of these post-Protestant groups have grown quite large and now play an important role in shaping the culture, most notably:

Jehovah's Witnesses	2,230,000
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	5,770,000

While to an outside observer like Herberg, both groups might seem to appear to be simply additional Christian variations, both have adopted beliefs and practices that make them unacceptable to the larger Christian community and both groups (along with numerous small post-Protestant groups) are continually having to redefine and reassert their vision of their place relative to Christianity. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are but the largest dissenting groups on the edge of the dominant Christian establishment in the United States.

Because of Judaism's role as the parent religion to Christianity, it too has a special place in American religion. The Jewish faith, though having only around four million adherents in the United States,<sup>15</sup> is the second largest religious tradition. Of the thirty or more Jewish "denominations" in America, three have emerged with a more than sizeable following. As a result of a century of Jewish-Christian dialogue, the Jewish community has now attained a meaningful place as part of the American religious establishment, in spite of its relatively small size.

Conservative Judaism	1,500,000	
Orthodox Judaism <sup>16</sup>	1,000,000	
Reform Judaism	1,500,000	

*Together the 28 religious bodies mentioned above (along with some 70 additional Christian churches that have as many as 100,000 members) constitute America's religious establishment, in the sense that together they largely control the environment in which most Americans operate religiously.* At the same time, to some degree, other religious groups have to react to and adjust to the environment these larger groups have created and maintain. Almost all of the 900 other smaller Christian denominations and Jewish synagogue associations have dissented from these groups on one or more issues. As a whole, these smaller denominations represent a visible lobby seeking change in one of the larger denominations on a relatively small set of issues –but issues deemed important enough to break fellowship. Most dissenting groups are conservative, in that the change they seek in the larger groups is a set backward toward a previous stance that they view their parent group as having abandoned. A second set of groups have simply dissented on matters that do not easily fall along a conservative-liberal spectrum, primarily organizational issues. And a lesser number of more progressive groups exist that seek theological innovation, more freedom in worship, and/or alternation of policies relative to public issues.

The very size and connectedness of the basic 28 religious groups means that, with few exceptions, every community of any size in America will have a representative congregation of these few groups, and, while

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<sup>14</sup> Post-Protestant groups are those groups which have their beginnings in the larger Protestant community, from which they take a great deal, but have also adopted elements of belief and behavior which have alienated them from the larger Protestant community. Though continuing to utilize the major Christian symbols, post-Protestant groups would not be recognized as fellow believers by Protestant churches.

<sup>15</sup> An uncounted number of people who would be defined as of Jewish ethnicity now follow one of the many different non-Jewish religions operating in the United States. Both the Hindu and Buddhist community, for example, include prominent leaders who were born and raised in Jewish homes.

<sup>16</sup> An estimate of the size of the Orthodox Jewish community is made more difficult as it is a splintered community with many divisions, including over a dozen Hasidic groups. The number presented here is limited to the estimated number of adherents of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, by far the largest of the several Orthodox groups.

admitting of regional differences, these congregations will offer much the same religious atmosphere to its congregants as found in like congregations elsewhere in the country. These denominations set the backdrop for emergent theologies and new approaches to the spiritual life. Their members will form the public to be organized for inter-denominational social movements, and constitute the people to be wooed and won as controversies wax and wane. And *while theologies, spiritualities, movements, issues, and controversies come and go, these denominations and their congregations persist, awaiting the next set of theologies, spiritualities, movements, issues, and controversies that will arise.*

### **The Mobile Religious**

The presence of so many diverse religions in the United States also speaks directly to the ongoing exploration of religious mobility across denominational lines. For several decades, social scientists have been startled and then intrigued by what has been seen as a growing level of religion switching with people abandoning the particular religion of their parents.<sup>17</sup> An examination of the changes that overtook the last generation of American religion provides some insight. We can begin with the fact that over half of the religious “denominations” now active in America were founded since 1965. While a percentage of the new groups are made up of immigrants who have set up outposts of the religion they brought with them, the great majority are made up of converts to a variations on Christianity) not available to their parents.

This mobility has been present from the beginning; it provided a foundation for the development of the hundreds of Christian denominations through the nineteenth century, and the doubling of that number in the first half of the twentieth century. The mobility of people from denomination to denomination was to some extent hidden amid the larger story of growth experienced by all denominations and the steady decline of the unaffiliated public. However, with the shrinking number of religiously unaffiliated, it is also the case that many newer Christian groups are growing not primarily by converting the unaffiliated, but by taking members from other Christian groups. This occurrence is most visible among the most conservative wing of Christianity where some groups define other Christians—liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox as outside the faith and hence legitimate objects for proselytization.

Religious movement has, of course, been somewhat correlated with family mobility, with most nuclear families moving several times over the course of their life, and high divorce rates, with family units being the major focus of many groups. That being the case, Americans have increasingly shown a willingness to leave older denominations and join new ones, both as a group and individually. To a lesser extent, they have been willing to leave Christianity for non-Christian religions. At the same time, the older churches, even those showing net membership losses, have received new members both from sister churches and the larger religious culture.

Given the number of new denominations and religious groups formed annually, it is not surprising that Americans switch denominations. It is also not surprising that one can often find secular social correlates to such switching. Remaining somewhat vague are the religious correlates. What religious decisions align with denominational switching? Most new denominations tend to be conservative, but by no means are they all, especially those formed more for organizational than theological reasons. When individuals leave a particular denomination, do they jump to a new denominational tradition (Methodist to Lutheran) or to another denomination in the same family (Missouri Lutheran to Wisconsin Lutheran)?

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<sup>17</sup> The question of denominational change has spawned a vast literature including Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Dean Hoge et al., *Vanishing Boundaries* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, 1994); and Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

## World Religions in America

The persistence of Christian denominations through the last half of the twentieth century and their existence as a dominating religious establishment provides the context for evaluating the emergence and institutionalization of the world's religions. Included within this larger picture of American religion are a variety of "Christian" groups who because of their distinctive beliefs and practices have developed apart from the mainstream of the Christian community, what we have termed the post-Protestant groups. Though some of these Christian groups have taken their place on the American religious scene and integrated themselves into the culture, they are still viewed as significantly different by most Christians—different enough that most Christians view them as "not of us" or the "other."<sup>18</sup>

Among these marginalized Christian groups, as mentioned above, are two of some size, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which claims 5.7 million members in the United States and the Jehovah's Witnesses with between 1.5 and 2.3 million members. Both groups are now visible in every part of the United States, even though 20 percent of all Latter-day Saints reside in the state of Utah, and their houses of worship are found in every community of any size. The Latter-day Saint have chosen to engage the culture and from their base in the Rocky Mountain states have attained a degree of social if not religious acceptance. Meanwhile, the Witnesses, who have adopted a more separatist stance, have developed a systematic program which attempts to reach every home in the United States every five years. Both groups have also parented a set of splinter groups, and a few such as the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints) have enjoyed some success regionally.

*The largest number of religious believers in America who are not adherents of a congregation aligned to the mainstream Christian community are members of the several post-Protestant groups.*

Following the changes of immigration law in 1965, Eastern religions began to grow. One of the smaller groups, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness became the single most visible Asian religion through the 1970s and 1980s, as its members engaged in public chanting and dancing on the streets of most urban centers and in fundraising and book distribution at the nation's airports. Similarly, Buddhists were gaining a high profile from the large numbers of Anglo converts, including many scholars. Although Asian religious groups formed by European-American converts have gained the higher profile, real growth has occurred from the annual movement of hundreds of thousands of Asians to the United States. Asian American Buddhists and Hindus have raised their profile slowly as they purchased and renovated abandoned church property and then as they meticulously built their often elaborate temples, which have proliferated on the edges of the major urban complexes. The Buddhist community in America received an additional lift from widespread publicity given the the Dalai Lama, though the actual number of Tibetan Buddhist adherents in the United States remains relatively small.

Though both the Buddhist and Hindu communities now number in the millions, their visibility nationally has been blunted by the uneven distribution of their members nationally. Forty percent of both communities reside in Southern California, with an additional strong presence in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is also the case that the Buddhist community is divided into more than 200 "sects," quite analogous to Christian denominations, with no one group having more than a few hundred thousand (the largest being the Soka Gakkai, with as many as a quarter of a million adherents).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Post-Protestant groups that have moved outside of the circle of what most Christians would view as acceptable Christian belief and behavior would include the Apostolic or "Jesus only" Pentecostals, the Unitarian-Universalists, The Family International, and the Unification Church, to name a few prominent examples.

<sup>19</sup> There is a vast descriptive literature relative to American Buddhism both historical and sociological, though little interest has been shown in attempting to document its many sectarian expressions. Helpful in gaining an overview are: James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*. (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1992); Peter Lorie and Julie Fookes, comp., *The Buddhist Directory: The Total Resource Guide* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1997); Don Morreale, ed., *The*

Hinduism is divided, with the more visible segment made up of European American converts affiliated with one of the nearly 100 organizations built around a contemporary living teacher (guru). The larger number, however, are as with the Buddhist community, to be found with the immigrant community, which is organized geographically, each temple serving those Indians Americans within driving distance of it.<sup>20</sup> Temples are locally autonomous but basically divided along geographical lines (serving southern Indian or northern Indians) or linguistic lines (Bengali, Tamil, Gujarati, etc.) and the two major communities (sampradayas) in each area (Vashnava or Saivite). Some of the new Hindu temples are replicas of famous temples in India.<sup>21</sup>

Most non-Asian converts to Hinduism are associated with one of the many “guru” groups, those new movements founded/headed by a living spiritual teacher. These groups found an opening in the West in the decades after Indian independence. They initially established themselves in Europe and then became popular in the United States in the 1970s. It is also the case that, in the last decade, a whole new wave of younger teachers has arisen to fill the vacuum as some of the original teachers who initially came to America in the 1970s have retired or passed away. These teachers are among the most difficult religious leaders to locate and document as their presence on the landscape is virtually invisible. They often operate out of rented facilities or in members homes, and have the fewest visible stable worship centers relative to their size, though their profile goes up somewhat during the summer when their nomadic teachers tend to make their American tours.

Currently, the most visible of all the newly arrived world's religions in America are the Muslims. They also, like the Hindus and Buddhists, have become concentrated in southern California, but are more evenly spread across the country and appear to have a larger number of adherents, though the actual number of Muslims in America is a matter hotly contested among those who try to count. ISAR has taken a more conservative approach and looks at a practicing Muslim community of some 4 million (again split into a variety of sub-communities divided along lines of national origin—Middle Eastern, Asian, African—and differences of belief and practice—Sunni, Shi'a, Ismaili, Sufi, etc.)

Just as non-Christians often do not see or understand the many divisions in Christianity, so many non-Muslims do not see the distinctive groups within the Muslim community. Relative to the United States, the largest percentage of American Muslims are of Indo-Pakistani origin (many associated with the Islamic Society of North America). The second largest group are African American converts.<sup>22</sup> Both groups outnumber the Arab

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*Complete Guide to Buddhist America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1973); Prebish, Charles S. *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Al Rapaport, comp., *Buddhism in America: Proceedings of the First Buddhism in America Conference* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Co., 1998); and Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> There are also a small number of temples that serve people of Indian heritage from other countries such as Guyana, Trinidad, or Malaysia, where Hindus have dwelt in numbers since the early nineteenth century.

<sup>21</sup> In stark contrast to Buddhism, there is a relatively small amount of literature on American, most descriptive literature limiting itself to one or a few of the different groups and even less that reflects on both the Indian American movement and temples and the those serving convert communities. Among the better sources are: Priya Agarwal, *Passage From India: Post-1965 Indian Immigrants and Their Children* (Palos Verdes, CA: Yuvati, 1991); Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes, eds., *Gurus in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Cral T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-century Explorations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Khyato Y. Joshi, *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, And Ethnicity in Indian America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Mahalingum Kolapen and Sanjay Kolapen, *Hindu Temples in North America: A Celebration*. (Orlando, FL: Hindu University of America, 2002); and Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero, *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> While most African Americans are Christians, they have also moved out to participate in the broad spectrum of America's religious life as well as becoming a conduit for the introduction of some African-based religions.



American Muslim community. Among the more prominent and older Muslim groups in America is the Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement, which has a relationship to the larger Muslim establishment not unlike that of the Jehovah's Witness to the mainstream Christian establishment.

The bombing of the Pentagon and World Trade center in 2001 significantly lifted the profile of the Muslim community, and made neighbors aware of the mosques that had been more-or-less quietly opened in almost every American urban center. It also lifted the profile of the Sikh community, as the turban-wearing Sikhs were frequently confused with Muslims in the year immediate after the 9/11 events. With the United States involved in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and making strong diplomatic moves involving China, Pakistan, and Iran (to name only a few prominent examples), the issues involving religion in foreign policy have given the Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims in America a place in the national consciousness that they would not have had otherwise. That heighten consciousness has significantly pushed forward the evolution of the country's self understanding as a multi-religious nation, in spite of the majority position of Christianity.

The rapid growth and heightened profile of the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities has had ambiguous results for Judaism. The Jewish community is still the largest non-Christian religious community in America, and continues to enjoy widespread benefits from the century-long growth of amiable relations between Jews and Christians that were fed by the decisions of Vatican II and a vigorous ongoing Jewish-Christian dialogue. Jews maintain their unique place in America life, some deriving from the Christian use of the Jewish Bible, and a great deal from the widespread revulsion over the culmination of anti-Semitism in the holocaust.

At the same time, the Jewish community has begun to feel the effects of the growth of competing religions and the persistence of attitudes in the still overwhelmingly dominant Christian community that view Jews as but one among many other religions. Leaders have also begun to anticipate a date in which the Muslim American community will overtake the Jewish community in size, the former being in a growth phase that dates to the 1970s. A variety of possibilities remain open for both communities.

### **Globalization of the Religious Community**

The pluralist religious environment emerging in the United States is now the common experience of the majority of the world's countries, with important differences in some countries where an older single religion, once the privileged faith, remains favored in many areas of life. In Malaysia, for example, there is a broad religious pluralism but among those who are Malaysians it is limited to the various sects of Islam, while the many varieties of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity flourish among that half of the population of Chinese, Indian, and European background.<sup>23</sup>

This amazing pluralism that became so visible in the late twentieth century can be traced to the global mission undertaken by Christianity during the colonial era. By the middle of the nineteenth century, most Christian denominations in North America and Europe were expending sizeable portions of their funds to sending missionaries around the world to spread Christianity. They succeeded in planting all of the Western denominations in new contexts where, as they took on an indigenous cast, they developed new histories, and new variations on denominational forms. As colonial establishments came to an end, overwhelmingly, the mission churches became autonomous bodies with local leadership. Thousands of new churches came into existence as Western churches cut their international members free.

The development of so many new churches country by country meant that new forms of association and fellowship had to be developed, and plans for such structures were already in formative stages as the new

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See Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *The Encyclopedia of World Christianity*. 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

independent governments arose—ecumenical councils. The new councils provided for a reordering of former relationships between mission-sending and mission-receiving churches into partnerships in mission. The process of forming such councils accelerated after World War II, the newly formed World Council of Churches becoming a model for regional, national, and more local councils. At the same time, older organizations that attempted to unite churches within a single denominational family (World Methodist Council, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Lutheran World Federation, etc.) were given new life and developed rapidly as former mission churches assumed their new roles on the global stage. Where important divisions had appeared within family groups multiple parallel family-based ecumenical organizations would appear to serve distinctive constituencies within different communions. The most would appear within the Reformed Presbyterian Family where fine distinctions would be drawn between separatist fundamentalists, evangelicals, and more liberal Presbyterians and between those of continental Reformed, British Presbyterians, and Congregationalist traditions.

The international ecumenical organizations that became so evident within Christian circles, were mirrored in other faiths as well. Internationally such organizations as the Muslim World League and the World Fellowship of Buddhists sought to bridge gaps that had arisen by the global spread of the religions, the rise of national states, and the different demands placed upon believers in varying contexts. Even a relatively small tradition like Judaism, which had developed distinctive denominational communities formed international structures (such as Masorti Olam, the World Council of Conservative/Masorti Synagogues, or the World Union of Progressive Judaism) that tie international groupings within Judaism together.

*Together, the global councilor structures developed by the major religious communities serve as an important counter move to the continued splintering of the religious scene. Because all of the major world religions have developed large worshipping constituencies in North America, the United States has become an important nexus for the global councilor organizations—all of which have a national or continental office in the United States, and many of which have their international headquarters here.*

### **Rise of Islam**

Possibly the most visible trend in American religion has been the rise of Islam, due to the unfortunate juxtaposition of the media's discovery of the presence of the large Muslim community immediately after the events of September 11, 2001. Even as the major newspapers and electronic media gained sophistication in separating the two realities, some commentators (including those speaking from a specifically religious position) consciously associated the two phenomena, ignoring the facts that those responsible for the bombing were not American residents (there were aliens primarily from Saudi Arabia) nor were they active in any American Muslim circles.

Prior to the 1960s, the American Muslim community was based in a relatively small Middle Eastern community, most residing in the American Midwest. After 1965 immigration from India and Pakistan took the lead (the same immigration which laid the foundation for the expansion of Hinduism) coupled with a parallel development of Islam within the African American community. Indo-Pakistani Muslims now make up the largest segment of the American Muslim community and has its organizational center in the Islamic Society of North America headquartered in suburban Indianapolis, Indiana.

The growth of Islam within the African American community is somewhat an artifact of Jim Crow legislation. Early in the nineteenth century, the discrimination directed against African Americans embedded in the legal structure and reflected in the attitudes of many Christians, led many African America to seek a new path in Islam and the related Black Nationalist movement. When a new Indo-Pakistani movement, the Ahmadiyyas, appeared in the 1920s, African Americans flocked to it and throughout most of the twentieth century formed the largest

segment of its membership. Today, quiet apart from sectarian Islamic movements such as the Nation of Islam led by Louis Farrakhan, African Americans make up more than 25 percent of the American Muslim community.<sup>24</sup>

*Its size, as well as the proper means of measuring the size, of the American Muslim community remains one of the most contested issues in American religious studies.* In the 1990s, some suggested that it might be as high as six million (a figure derived from adding all the immigrants from predominantly Muslim communities). That figure was immediately contested, and a census of all the mosques in America could find only about 1.5 million attendees. While a few continue to advocate the larger figure, most now look to three to four million Muslims (a figure more in line with the developing Buddhist and Hindu communities) and including many people who would might self-identify as Muslims though currently not active in any organized religious activities. The exact figure has become more than important as Muslims seek to become active in pressing their case for changes in government policies toward the Middle East and resolving issues of discrimination experienced by its members. American Muslims also look to the day when their still growing community will overtake the Jewish community in size (and likely to occur in the 2020s if present growth rates continue).

Meanwhile, Islam has assumed a very public presence. Mosques are now found in every American city of any size. At the same time, Muslim leaders, conditioned to participating in public life throughout the Muslim world, more quickly than their Buddhist and Hindu neighbors, moved to exercise their role in cultural and political affairs through organizations such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council, with headquarters offices in both southern California and Washington, D.C. and the Council on America-Islamic Relations, also based in Washington, D.C.

### **Revitalizing Christianity through Pentecostalism**

Many commentators on twentieth century religion see Pentecostalism as the most definitive movement of the twentieth century. Founded in 1901, it experienced a sudden national and even international expansion during the years of the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles (1906-1909). Denounced for decades as a realm of over-emotional primitive religious experiences attracting the mentally unstable, Pentecostalism nevertheless grew through the first half of the twentieth century and took its first steps into acceptance by the larger Christian community when several of its denominational structures joined the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). A variety of psychological studies in the 1960s and 1970s dispelled any criticisms of a connection between Pentecostal spirituality and mental disorders (the case appearing to be quite the opposite). Meanwhile, the continued acceptance of Pentecostals in the NAE has led to their dominance of the organization. Like Evangelicals in general, Pentecostals found religious broadcasting a major tool that greatly assisted the movement's phenomenal growth during the last half of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> On Islam in America see: Paul M. Barrett, *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Ilyas Ba-Yunus and M. Moin Siddique, *A Report on Muslim Population in the United States of America* (New York: Center for American Muslim Research, 1998); Abdo A. Elkholy, *The Arab Moslems in the United States: Religion and Assimilation* (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1966); Yvonne Yazbek Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Amber Haque, ed., *Muslims and Islamization in North America: Problems and Prospects* (Beltsville, MD: Amana, 1999); Michael A. Koszegi and J. Gordon Melton, *Islam in North America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland, 1992); and Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> On the development of the modern Pentecostal and Charismatic community, see: Edith L. Blumhofer, Russell P. Spittler, and Grant A. Wacker, eds. *Pentecostal Currents in American Protestantism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); L. Grant McClug, Jr., *Azusa Street and Beyond: Pentecostal Missions and Church Growth in the Twentieth Century* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge, 1986); Cecil Robeck, Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission & Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson 2006); Vinson Synan, ed., *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901–2001* (Nashville, TN:

In the 1960s, the Pentecostal experience of speaking in tongues and the other charismatic gifts of the spirit (I Corinthians 12), especially spiritual healing moved anew into the larger churches. Through the 1970s, almost all non-Pentecostal Christian denominations of any size developed a charismatic movement within it. Collectively the Charismatic community quickly spread through the denominations internationally and jumped to denominations in countries around the world. During the last decades of the twentieth century, Pentecostal churches developed as large international bodies, though their growth was small relative to the spread of the charismatic movement within otherwise non-Pentecostals denominations. This latter spread has made Pentecostalism an international movement with which to be reckoned.

The growth of Pentecostalism in the United States is seen in the appearance of three Pentecostal churches among the 23 largest churches in the United States. Among the more noteworthy religious discoveries of the 1990s was that the Church of God in Christ, an African American church that had previously never done a real membership count, was among the five largest churches in America. As the older Pentecostal churches have grown, the charismatic movement has continued and a third wave neo-Charismatic movement has made its presence felt. The Charismatic movement, which has become the dominant face of Pentecostalism in most countries, peaked in North America in the 1980s as each of the major denomination took positions of mild opposition. Church leaders opposed Charismatics treating their nonCharismatic fellow members as second-class Christians, a set of new Charismatic denominations were formed by people disappointed at the larger churches reluctance to embrace the Charismatic renewal.

In some countries, the Third Wave or neo-Charismatic movement, which finds its historical base in the Latter-Rain movement of the 1940s, and which has taken the movement in a somewhat different direction through its apostolic and prophetic leadership, has also developed in North America, but has had its major success in South America and Africa. Because of the uneven level of leadership provided in the neo-Charismatic movement, the possibilities of straying into questionable areas doctrinally (such as the positive confession movement), and the competition neo-Charismatic groups offer to the strong older Pentecostal denominations, the Third Wave groups have been somewhat marginalized in North America, though a few have developed strong national organizations.

### **New Religious Movements**

Among the religious controversies of the last decades of the twentieth century, few reached the intensity of the "cult wars." As a result of the convergence of the changes in immigration law in 1965 and the coming of age of the baby boom generation, a new generation of religious founders found a ready audience for its messages. Several hundred new unfamiliar religious organizations founded in the 1950s and 1960s joined several hundred additional groups launched in the 1970s with both enjoying a period of rapid growth among young adults unable to find a place in a society not ready to receive them. While most of these new religions slowly assumed a low profile position in the culture, several dozen, due in large part to their aggressive recruitment tactics and the high level of demands they made on the time and energy of their members, became embedded in controversy.

The controversy surrounding new religions was fading through the 1970s, but suddenly burst forth with new energy following the deaths of the members of the Peoples Temple at Jonestown, Guyana, in November 1978. The Peoples Temple was an unusual group. It was a congregation in a large America denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a member of the National Council of Churches. In the mid 1970s, its members were very active in the California ecumenical scene, and its social action work received high praise in liberal Protestant circles. Following the death's in Guyana, however, it went from controversial congregation to "cult" overnight, and became the catalyst for a spectrum of legislation initiated at both the federal and state level and the organization of a national cult awareness movement. Unable to get legislation passed, the cult awareness movement operated in civil court where, through the 1980s, it backed a number of former members in suits

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Thomas Nelson, 2001) and Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

claiming that the religion they had left had brainwashed them. The coercive control implied in the brainwashing accusation not only formed the foundation for the court action but also justified the accompanying practice of kidnapping group members and subjecting them to a process of “deprogramming” in the attempt to have group members renounce their faith.

Both the civil suits, which had netted a number of multi-million dollar judgments, and the practice of deprogramming were stopped following a series of reversals in court beginning in 1990 when a federal court declared that the expert witnesses who spoke of brainwashing did not meet the court's case for scientific testimony. Previously, several academic organizations, most notably the American Psychological Association, had declared the case proposed by its members for psychological brainwashing to be methodologically flawed. In 1995, following a counter suit brought by a victim of an unsuccessful deprogramming, the main cult awareness organization, the Cult Awareness Network, was forced into bankruptcy.

1995 essentially marked the end of the “cult wars.” From that date, most of the new religions, including the more controversial ones saw a significant drop in the level of tension they experienced relative to the larger society and more established religious community. At the same time, the newer new religions, those founded after 1990, found a higher level of initial acceptance within the American culture and escaped the period of trials prior to being integrated into the larger religious landscape.<sup>26</sup>

### **Persisting Racial Barriers**

Even as the Civil Rights movement was taking the lead in changing American behavior relative to race, 11 AM on Sunday morning, when most congregations meet for worship, was described as the most segregated hour in American life. Since the Civil War, segregated worship has been the norm in American religion, the few exceptions being congregations that self consciously decided to create an integrated congregation. One church stands out in this regard, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. Pentecostalism had largely been generated out of the revival of an African American congregation in Los Angeles, under the leadership of an African American preacher. It had attempted to evolve as an integrated movement and early on had prominent African American leaders from C. H. Mason to G. T. Haywood. However, the segregation patterns throughout American culture, enforced by law in the South, led the emerging denominations to become either all white or all Black.

The Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, one of the first of the Pentecostals denominations to take shape (1906), though hit with the full force of the arguments for segregation, backed by significant schism of white member, kept its ideals and was able to retain a measurable white minority membership. It manifested its interracial commitments by periodically electing white leaders to top posts, but one symbol of the effort it continues to live beyond the racism within the larger culture.

Beginning at the time of the Civil Rights movement, a number of the larger predominantly white denominations with a Black minority moved to end segregated structures, passed statements repenting of past racist attitude and resulting deeds, moved to back measures that empowered Black members, and in general created an atmosphere that would allow the initial element of racial harmony to steadily increase. Overwhelming Black church members responded with words of acceptance and forgiveness and pledges to cooperate with the new attitudes that were being generated. Through the 1970s, segregated structures were largely eliminated at the national and regional level and soon afterwards desegregation began to occur at the state and more local jurisdictional levels.

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<sup>26</sup> From the vast literature on the new religions and the oppositional cult awareness movement see: Peter Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2006); Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley, *Cults and New Religions* (Maldin, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft, eds. *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*. 5 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006); and Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000);



Less noticeable has been the emergence of functionally integrated congregations in those areas where the local community is integrated. The integration of local congregations has proved far more complex an issue that envisioned in the 1960s, and for a variety of reasons, the emergence of the stated ideal, a time when race is no longer an issue in determining membership in congregations, may be slow in being realized.

### Western Esotericism

Among the many noteworthy national/international movements of the last half of the twentieth century was the New Age, a millennial movement that in the 1970s proposed the emergence of a New Age of love and light (Wisdom) to arrive early in the twenty-first century. As the movement underwent analysis, the New Age was seen as a revitalization movement within the older “occult” community, it was originally generated within and derived its initial support from some independent British theosophical groups.

Utilizing some older occult practices, the New Age movement called people’s attention, in a new and different context, to the possibility of healing and transformation of their individual lives while at the same time projecting a vision of broad social renovation. From England, the movement traveled to the United States and found popular support in a wide range of alternative religious groups, most relatively small. However, year by year, the movement grew and through the 1980s began to count its adherents in the hundreds of thousands and then in the millions. As it peaked toward the end of the 1990s, it is estimated that as many as two to three percent of the population were attracted to it and many times that number at least minimally affected by it.

The New Age movement transformed the older relatively miniscule occult community into what in the 1990s began to be called the Western Esoteric community—a new name denoting the new level of respectability that these earlier despised and berated beliefs and practices had attained. The new name also came as the culmination of a generation of scholarship that had been done on esoteric groups, redefining them as part of a third religious tradition whose origins rivaled that of the more dominant Christian community. The Esoteric tradition is a broken tradition whose adherents were, like the Jews, frequently the object of persecution, but which had since the seventeenth century been able to find increasing space in the West.<sup>27</sup>

*The Western Esoteric Tradition has supplied an alternative to the mainstream orthodox Christian tradition since the emergence of the Gnostics in the Patristic Era* (the exact origins of the Gnostics being another significantly contested issue in contemporary scholarship). Once Christianity became the dominant religious community in the West, groups with strong resemblance to the Gnostics regularly reappeared and were just as regularly hounded out of existence. However, in the growing atmosphere of religious freedom, Gnostic-like groups, some even assuming that name, have once again returned in force, and now are taking their place on the larger religious landscape, offering further expansion to the pluralism to which it provides a home.

### The Tradition of Unbelief

We can close this all too hasty survey of trends in American religions by noting the emergence of an organized and vocal movement that hangs together by their disparagement of theism. Unbelievers go under a variety of names—atheist, Humanist, rationalist, secularist, freethinker, agnostic—to name a few, and it is no small task to

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<sup>27</sup> The story of the Western Esoteric tradition in the United States is just beginning to be written. There are numerous histories of particular movements or groups within tradition but only a few volumes that attempt a broad look at the tradition as a whole. See Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (February 1, 1992); Robert S. Ellwood, Jr. *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988); J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

understand the world of unbelief and how it relates to the Christian community specifically and the larger world of religious believers in general.

On one end of the spectrum of unbelief are people who have thought about religious questions and have rejected any belief in God and any concern even in a non-theistic way with spirituality, transcendence, or the sacred. They are largely invisible, as they have disassociated themselves from any religious inquiry. Next, we have those who are atheists, but who remain engaged in religious questions, and who have made the critique of belief in God and adherence to religion a matter of ongoing concern. Such folk, often feel that religion is a social evil, that it has significant dirt on its hands from past and present evils in which it has participated, primarily in efforts at social control. These atheists often adhere to the several national and many local atheist organizations such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin, and have since the 1960s become increasingly active in the public square on a spectrum of social issues, most notably in issues having to do with separation of church and state. Atheists will divide over whether or not to make common cause with religious people on specific issues about which they agree.

Slightly further along the spectrum are the Humanists. While atheists argue about whether to cooperate with the religious on common concerns, Humanists argue about being religious. Humanists offer a total worldview that attempts to meet many needs generally ascribed to religion—an ethical perspective, ritual, community, identification with and response to human suffering, etc. A non-theistic Humanist religious perspective began to be articulated on the edge of the Unitarian community early in the twentieth century and it grew into what is now the American Humanist Association. Possibly the largest such Humanist community is in Norway, now one of the larger dissenting groups in the country. The largest community of non-religious Humanists is now affiliated with the Council of Secular Humanists.

The development of the spectrum of organized unbelief presents a set of problems to any analysis of American religion.<sup>28</sup> As noted earlier, as spectacular as any trend in American religion through the twentieth century has been the dwindling of the percentage of the religiously unaffiliated from 65 percent to a mere 15 percent. Interestingly, the actual number of the unaffiliated has remained about the same, between 40 and 50 million. What has changed has been the number of people who identify themselves as having no religion, moving from 14 million (1990) to 34 million (2008).<sup>29</sup> That number represents a mixed bag of people from committed atheists to committed mystics who remain unattached to any religious community.<sup>30</sup> Most atheists are not members of any atheist organization, the logic of their position usually driving them to other concerns. Meanwhile, there are many among the unaffiliated who remain uncommitted to any position, as they simply have yet to get around to thinking about religious issues.<sup>31</sup>

Some within the Unbelief community count all the unaffiliated as their allies and are encouraged that so many have apparently chosen not to affiliate with a religious organization. Many Christians see these same people as the unchurched—potential converts. Those of a particular ethnic background are seen as merely inactive members of one of the ethnic-based religions, be it Russian Orthodox or Lubavitch Hasidism. In any case, the presence of a vocal community of Unbelief, what we might think of as the religiously irreligious, provides those

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<sup>28</sup> On the tradition of Unbelief in America see: Fred Gladstone Bratton, *The Legacy of the Liberal Spirit: Men and Movements in the Making of Modern Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1943); Marshall G. Brown and Gordon Stein, *Freethought in the United States: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978); Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); James Thrower, *Western Atheism: A Short History* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1999); James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

<sup>29</sup> See “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population.” American Religious Identification Survey 2008. Posted at <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/>. Accessed January 15, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> The number of the religious unaffiliated is increased annually by immigration, as those willing to leave to a new country are also those that as a whole have broken the most ties to their place of origin. A high (but unknown) number have shown themselves to be religiously unaffiliated.

<sup>31</sup> Research on the contemporary community of unbelief is being focused by the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

who see theism as nonsense and religion as a waste of time with a community with whom they can identify. The present community also calls attention to the existence of Unbelief as a tradition that reaches back to colonial times, claims heroes of the Revolution from Thomas Paine to Ethan Allen, claims at least one president (Thomas Jefferson), and has played a significant role in enlivening America's intellectual culture through the nineteenth and twentieth century to the present. *As we write the story of American religion in the future, we will speak of four traditions interacting from the seventeenth century to the present—the Christian, Jewish, Western Esoteric and Unbelief.*

### **In Summary**

As American religion begins the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it does so in a very positive environment. With few exceptions, religious communities are in a growth trajectory, the growth of one not dependent on the growth (or decline) of others and often accomplished without awareness of the rise and fall of religious neighbors. Given the projected population growth and current immigration policies, the continued growth of religion seems to be the story that will dominate in the religious community. Those groups that continue to lose members will be the exception, and their losses in such a context a matter for continued serious reflection.

While non-Christians groups will continue to grow during the next generation, there is nothing on the horizon to suggest a loss of Christian hegemony in the religious community as a whole nor have any groups appeared that will even begin to challenge that hegemony. At the same time, religious leaders reflecting on the global situation appear ready to offer other religions a level of freedom and respect to operate (significantly beyond mere tolerance) that would have been hardly imaginable even a century ago. This new level of religious pluralism even reaches out to the new Humanist-atheist community, whose observations are now welcomed into the discussion on basic religious concerns.

Megatrends book. Read 25 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives. Re-reading this classic after more than 30 years, I'm amazed about how much Naisbitt got right. While many of his positive ideas haven't yet been adopted - like realizing being a bilingual nation is a strength - the future he predicted is still coming to fruition. Like many books I read, this became the inspiration for a blog post: [https://www.markfallon.com/blog/what Americans surveyed on their religious knowledge got half the questions wrong, including ones about their own faith](https://www.markfallon.com/blog/what-Americans-surveyed-on-their-religious-knowledge-got-half-the-questions-wrong-including-ones-about-their-own-faith). Forty-five percent of Catholics did not know that their church teaches that the consecrated bread and wine in holy communion are not merely symbols, but actually become the body and blood of Christ. Forty-three percent of Jews did not know that Maimonides, one of the foremost rabbinical authorities and philosophers, was Jewish. The question about Maimonides was the one that the fewest people answered correctly. But 51 percent knew that Joseph Smith was Mormon, and 82 percent knew that Mother Teresa was Roman Catholic. Correction: September 29, 2010. Religion is an essential element of the human condition. Hundreds of studies have examined how religious beliefs mold an individual's sociology and psychology. In particular, research has explored how an individual's religion (religious beliefs, religious denomination, strength of religious devotion, etc.) is linked to their cultural beliefs and background. While some researchers have asserted that religion is an essential part of an individual's culture, other researchers have focused more on how religion is a culture in itself. It is difficult to define religion from one perspective and with one encompassing definition. "Religion" is often defined as the belief in or the worship of a god or gods. Geertz (1973) defined a religion as.