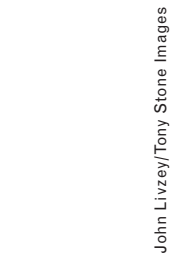
AMERICA'S EVER-CHANGING RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

by Richard N. Ostling



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WHERE WE'VE COME FROM AND WHERE WE'RE GOING

The story of religion in the United States is the story of immigration. Ongoing waves of newcomers to this country, in combination with internal developments, have assured that no nation on earth has experienced such wholesale changes in its religious makeup or had such a lavish variety of faiths from which to choose. A brief survey of the past two centuries illustrates the point—and suggests no diminution of the trend in the future.

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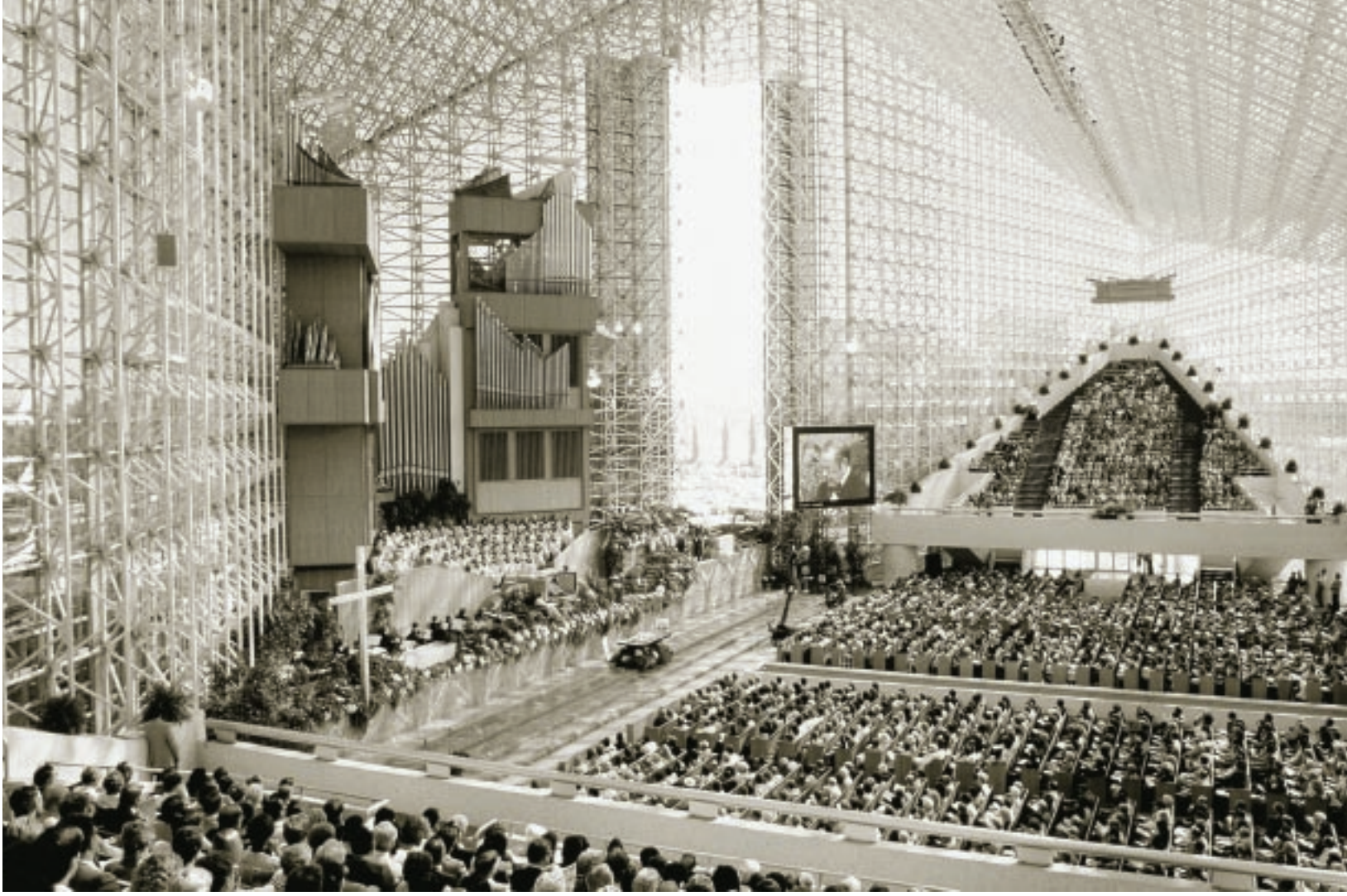
In a 1992 book, *The Churching of America: 1776–1990*, sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark note that a 1776 survey of all American religious congregations found groups with British roots dominant. No big surprise there. Congregationalists boasted 668 congregations, Presbyterians 588, Baptists 497, Episcopalians 495, and Quakers 310. Those five Protestant groups accounted for nearly 80 percent of America's congregations. Following them in descending order were the German Reformed Church, Lutherans, the Dutch Reformed Church (now the Reformed Church in America), Methodists, Catholics (with 65 congregations), and Jews (with 5 synagogues).

By 1850 both immigration and internal evangelism had caused many changes. More than a third of Americans who belonged to a religious body were now Methodists (they had climbed from 9th place in 1776 to 1st place in 1850, mainly because of evangelism). About 21 percent of "churched" Americans were Baptists. Some 14 percent were Catholics (up from 10th place in 1776 to 3rd place in 1850, mostly because of immigration). Presbyterians still claimed 12 percent of churchgoers but were in slow decline. Con-



gregationalists had fallen to only 4 percent, Episcopalians to 3.5 percent. Quakers were well back in the pack.

By 1890 the top four groups had again switched places. For the first time, Catholics, with 7.3 million members, including children, claimed first place—a ranking they have kept ever since and always will, barring a massive merger among Protestant groups. Methodists followed with 7.1 million members, Baptists with 5.9 million, and Presbyterians with 1.9 million. Thirty-five years later, in 1925, Baptists had laid permanent claim to being the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Their ascendancy was due both to expansion of white Baptists and to better counting and organization of black Baptist congregations. The mostly white Southern Baptist Convention, despite its name, is represented in all 50 states and has for years been not only the largest Baptist group but the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

Now let's leap ahead to 1999. At the end of the millennium, each of two dozen religious bodies has as many local congregations as made up the whole of American religion in 1776. Table 1 illustrates not only the decline and fall of the Colonial masters, but also the rise of new denominations since Colonial days and the vast variety in American religion today. Nobody knows the number of independent evangelical charismatic congregations, but the totals would be toward the top of the list.

Protestant Secularization: The Rise of the Evangelicals

The United States is noteworthy not only for the variety of its religions, but also for its high level of religiosity, which challenges the sociological theory, based on European experience, that as a society becomes more advanced, more industrial, and more technological, it will become more secular. At the time of the American Revolution about 17 percent of Americans were churched. By the Civil War, the share had grown to 37 percent. Early in this century it was just over half, and in our own generation it is more than 60 percent—some portion of which consists of merely nominal members.

America does display a different sort of secularization, according to Finke and Stark, and others. Long-established Protestant denominations tend to become more liberal in doctrine. As they do, they give rise to splits by more sectarian followers of the older tradition, or they stagnate and leave more room for emerging sectarian competitors. Since the mid-1960s, something even more radical has happened. Rather than just slowing in growth or remaining flat, some of the major "Mainline" or "old-line" denominations have suffered new membership declines, year after year after year. The big losers—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church—are gener-

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ally long-established, predominately white and affluent, ecumenical and interfaith in spirit, affiliated with the National Council of Churches, and longtime leaders in college and seminary education. Relatively liberal in religion and politics, these groups have produced the leadership of business and politics and have long been considered the voice of Protestantism in what remains a heavily Protestant culture.

The Mainline groups' cultural role has gradually been supplanted by the upstart conservative Protestants generally known as Evangelicals. White Evangelicals outside the National Council of Churches now outnumber white Protestants within the ecumenical fold. Without understanding this great two-party split in Protestantism, one cannot understand American religion today. It is now commonplace that the differences within a denominational family are wider and more important than the differences outside. Conservative Presbyterians have more in common with conservative Lutherans today than either has with more liberal believers carrying the same denominational label. More confusing yet, the conservative Evangelical movement consists of three sectors: entire denominations (such as the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod), countless independent congregations, and the conservative factions within the Mainline denominations.

The rising Evangelical coalition is divided in other ways. The dying Old Fundamentalists are those caught in the cultural bondage of anti-Catholicism, sometimes anti-Semitism, and in the case of Bob Jones University, of racism. The New Fundamentalists are epitomized by Jerry Falwell, who moved his flock to respectability on those points while maintaining a strictly separatist and sectarian stance. Falwell has just affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, which shows how solidly right wing that denomination has become. The Evangelical groups also include those too moderate to be called Fundamentalists, who have as their titular leader Billy Graham; the Pentecostal denominations, who teach the infilling of the Holy Spirit accompanied by speaking in tongues; and Charismatics, including both independent congregations and factions within Mainline groups, who follow looser forms of Pentecostal practice. Black Protestantism is evangelical in many ways but is considered a separate tradition for the most part.

Since World War II, the sprawling and loosely organized conservative Evangelical movement has become the new establishment, the largest single religious faction in the United States. They are the innovators of American religion—in radio, television, religious movies, advertising, publishing, Christian pop and rock music, foreign mission work, seminary education, and cyberspace. Bible Belt conservatives have also shown moxie in political organizing and lobbying that far outshines that from the religious left, which cherished this field as its own for so long.

The Evangelical boom is in some ways more a story of liberal Protestant failure than conservative brilliance. As lamented by Wheaton College Professor Mark Noll in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, the Evangelicals have largely failed to create an intellectual culture with staying power over against the world views they oppose. With the exception of a handful of colleges, for example, the Evangelicals have been unable to nurture distinguished reli-

Table 1. The American Religious Landscape Today

Denomination	Number of Congregations
Southern Baptist Convention	40,565
United Methodist Church	36,361
National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.	33,000
Roman Catholic Church	22,728
Church of God in Christ	15,300
Churches of Christ	14,000
Assemblies of God	11,884
Presbyterian Church USA	11,328
C.o.J.C.o. Latter-day Saints	11,000
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	10,396
Jehovah's Witnesses	10,671
African Methodist Episcopal Church	8,000
Episcopal Church	7,415
United Church of Christ	6,110
Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod	6,099
Church of God (Tennessee)	6,060
American Baptist Churches	5,839
(Independent) Christian Churches	5,579
Church of the Nazarene	5,135
Seventh Day Adventist Church	4,363
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	3,840
United Pentecostal Church	3,790
Baptist Bible Fellowship	3,600
Jewish congregations (all denominations)	3,416

giously based liberal arts universities as did the Mainline Protestants—who invented the idea only to hand it away to secular influences.

Not Just the Protestants

The American Catholic church today is a far different church than it was in the early 1960s. From a denomination presided over by an unquestionably infallible Pope and a well-disciplined clergy with no public dissent and characterized by a venerable liturgy, recited in Latin, with weekly attendance expected of all, it has become a federation of internally divided quasi-denominations. What began in the 1960s with a seemingly modest effort of reform at the Second Vatican Council has ended with every aspect of Catholic tradition under question, and the questioners under question by a rigorous Pope and his Vatican staff. America's biggest single denomination is now a federation of fiefdoms consisting of the loyalists and the liberals, the divorced and remarried, the alienated and the indifferent, the merely ethnic or "communal Catholics" and the "cafeteria Catholics" who pick and choose what to practice. Public opinion surveys show that people who identify as Catholic are more liberal on sexual morals than Protestants as a whole. Birth rates and opinions on abortion are virtually the same. Like Protestantism, the American Catholic Church today seems to be many denominations, loosely united.

In Judaism, perhaps the biggest development is the aging and shrinking of its population base. Younger American Jews marrying Gentiles are now a majority for the first time in history. The Jewish population study of 1990 shows that children of these mixed marriages are least likely to receive a Jewish upbringing, more likely to be educated into Christianity—but most likely to receive no religious education and to carry no religious identification into adulthood. Recently we had two cries of alarm, one from Alan Dershowitz on the secular left and the other from Elliott Abrams on the religious right, saying American Judaism is in mortal danger unless it somehow provides a new identity to the younger generation.

What About Everybody Else?

A topic of considerable controversy among experts on American religion is the number of Americans who belong to religions other than Christianity and Judaism. In 1989 and 1990 City University of New York researchers put a religious identification question on a random telephone marketing survey and got data for 113,000 U.S. households. Their estimate was that there were 527,000 Muslims, 401,000 Buddhists, and 227,000 Hindus in the United States. By contrast, the 1998 Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year puts the numbers at 3.8 million Muslims, 1.9 million Buddhists, and almost 800,000 Hindus. And needless to say, if you ask publicists for the Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists, they will give you estimates vastly bigger than the Britannica does. Two special factors affect new and immigrant faiths. First, they may lack organizational infrastructure that relates to specific religious congregations. For example, despite estimates of millions of U.S. Muslims, only a thousand or so mosques and community centers exist to serve them. And for Buddhists and Hindus, the whole idea of congregations and denominations and memberships is alien to Asian tradition.

However we count them, there is no doubt that immigrants are now, as before, gradually changing the face of American religion. President Johnson's signing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the first major change in law since 1924, greatly facilitated entry by Asians. Buddhism and Hinduism are now firmly rooted in America, and Islam has the potential to rival or surpass Judaism as the nation's second-ranking religion if institutions and leaders to serve them can be found.

Islam faces the same challenge as Judaism with the influx from Eastern Europe toward the end of the 19th century. New-style congregations had to be invented, new buildings built, and new schools started to train a new type of rabbi. U.S. Islam is just beginning to create the communal organizations that have served Judaism so well. There is no coherent association of mosques to unite immigrants with native-born blacks, and national organizations of other types are young. Muslims are divided the way Protestants have been, by ethnicity, race, and language. Only in 1996 did U.S. Muslims establish a school for training clergy at the graduate level to parallel the Jewish and Christian seminaries.

Another future trend to note is the large and growing minority of younger Americans who define themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious," signaling a quest that is neither limited by nor nurtured by the traditional organized religions of the past. More than any previous generation, Americans age 18 and under are thoroughly detached from traditional Christian concepts. By and large they do not believe Jesus is the unique savior of mankind, do not read the Bible as God's word, and do not accept the idea of moral absolutes. Whether one views that as progress or regress depends on one's own concepts of Christianity, reality, and the cosmos. But it is certainly another revolution in our time.

Futurists are telling us that the old ways of doing religion in America cannot last. Younger Americans have increasingly short attention spans, so that one California church changes the elements of worship every eight to ten minutes—a development that sounds the death knell of the sermon. We're told young Americans are increasingly unable to read printed material—a body blow to Protestant religion as we've known it. They say youth distrusts traditional institutions, among which the church and synagogue are the most traditional of all. Some few are pronouncing even the decline of local congregations in favor of informal house churches or cyber-churches linked only randomly by computer or totally individual behaviors.

Those who look to the churches for the salvation of civic life or for the renovation of politics should realize that organized religion will have its hands full coping with purely internal issues in the coming generation. ■