

Institutional Change in American Religion

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Abstract

This essay provides an overview of demographic and organizational changes in American religion since 1965. We focus on religious beliefs and practices, congregational life, special purpose groups, religion outside of religious organizations, and transnational and global aspects of religion. American religious institutions are increasingly diverse, reflecting the growing ethnic, linguistic, and religious pluralism of the United States. Recent immigrants to the United States are more Catholic, more Orthodox, and less Christian than adult Americans overall, and they have joined existing congregations in addition to forming their own religious organizations. A substantial number of Americans now consider themselves spiritual, but not religious, and many do not identify with organized religion at all. American Christianity itself is more politically polarized than in the past, and individuals who are religiously active across traditions tend to be more politically and socially conservative than others with tensions evident around contemporary social issues such as abortion and homosexuality. Existing religious organizations and secular organizations such as hospitals, universities, and prisons have responded to demographic and religious changes by offering new or changed services and physical spaces to meet religious and spiritual needs. We encourage future scholars to address institutional changes in American religion by considering diverse people and traditions, asking questions about religion in religious and nonreligious organizations, and situating studies of the United States in their broader global contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Religion in the United States takes many organizational forms. From traditional congregations to special interest groups to the ways religion—and increasingly spirituality—is a part of formally secular organizations such as universities, hospitals, and prisons, religion is part of multiple organizations in a range of diverse ways (Cadge, 2013; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Sullivan, 2009). Changes in American religious demographics shape organizational changes in American religion just as broader institutional changes shape the forms religion and spirituality take in American life.

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This essay offers a brief overview of demographic and organizational changes in American religion since 1965. We highlight how these shifts shape and are shaped by broader institutional changes. We focus on questions of personal belief and practice, congregational influence, special purpose groups, religion outside of religious organizations, and transnational and global aspects of religion. We encourage future scholars to continue thinking about institutional changes in American religion by considering diverse people and traditions, asking questions about religion in religious and nonreligious organizations, and situating studies of the United States in their broader global contexts (Bender, Cadge, Levitt, & Smilde, 2013).

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

When Will Herberg famously described the United States as a “triple melting pot” in his influential book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1960), most Americans did in fact identify as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish (Fischer & Hout, 2006). Since 1965, however, religion in the United States has been shaped by the decline of mainline Protestantism, the growth of evangelical Christianity, significant immigration, and increased “nones” or people who claim no religious affiliation when asked in surveys (Edgell, 2012; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999; Wolfe, 2003; Wuthnow, 1988). Demographic changes including increasing age at first marriage, delayed childbearing, and a growing number of people raised without religion also influence contemporary religious life (Fischer & Hout, 2006; Fischer, Hout, & Latham, 2000; Hertel, 1995; Hout & Fischer, 2002; Putnam, 2000). This shifting religious landscape is characterized by internal diversity within Protestantism and Catholicism, a growing number of non-Christian Americans, and more tolerance for religious variety in American life.

In his recent description of trends in American religion, sociologist Mark Chaves (2011) points to both continuity and change in belief and practice. Since 1972, the fraction of Americans who say they know God exists has been consistent at 64%. The number of those who pray several times a week or more (69%) has not changed, nor has the fraction who report born-again experiences (36%). The fraction that believes in God has decreased very slowly, still remaining above 90%. People’s families and friendship circles have become more religiously diverse in the past 40 years and they seem more religiously tolerant than in the past. Increasing numbers seem comfortable with diffuse senses of spirituality and rates of attendance at religious services have softened (Chaves, 2011; Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

Distinctions between liberals and conservatives have long been a component of American Christianity, a divide that intensified in the past 45 years, particularly among Protestants. In his study of American religious structures since World War II, Wuthnow (1988) describes how previous liberal-conservative differences over theological orientations were superseded in the 1960s by conflicts over the appropriate role of religion and religious leaders in public life and broader social change. In recent decades, higher fertility and earlier childbearing among conservative Protestants combined with fewer upwardly mobile Protestants shifting from more conservative to more liberal churches in adulthood has led the conservative side of this Christian religious divide to grow (Chaves, 2011; Fischer & Hout, 2006). Tensions between religious liberals and conservatives in religious groups more broadly are particularly evident around contemporary social issues including abortion and homosexuality (Brint & Abrutyn, 2010; Brooks & Manza, 1997; Green, 2009; Williams, 2009). Today, individuals who are religiously active across traditions tend to be more politically and socially conservative than others (Chaves, 2011).

In the twentieth century, immigration shaped American religious life primarily through the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act that removed country-of-origin quotas and diversified the countries from which immigrants arrived (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Hirschman, 2004). Subsequent immigrants diversified American Christianity, particularly Catholicism, and increased the numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and people with no religious affiliation on American shores (Jasso, Massey, Rosenzweig, & Smith, 2003). New waves of legal immigrants are more Catholic and more Orthodox, but also less Christian than adult Americans overall (Massey & Higgins, 2011). This diversification among immigrants is evident in gateway cities such as Los Angeles and New York with large immigrant populations as well as in smaller cities and rural communities where immigrants later settled or refugees were resettled (Cadge, Levitt, Jaworksy, & Clevenger, 2013; Gozdzik & Martin, 2005; Hernández-León & Zúñiga, 2005; Massey, 2008).

Despite claims that migration is a “theologizing” experience through which immigrants turn to religion for support (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Hagan, 2008; Smith, 1978; Warner, 1998; Warner & Wittner, 1998), migration can actually disrupt religious life (Wuthnow & Christiano, 1979). Recent studies find that religious participation—although not religious belief—among new legal immigrants actually drops in the months after receiving their residence visas in the United States (Connor, 2009; Massey & Higgins, 2011). However, there is some evidence to suggest that religious participation may eventually increase (or rebound to previous levels) with additional years spent in the United States (Akresh, 2011).

Alongside shifts brought by changing demographics and immigration are growing numbers of Americans who claim no religious affiliation. A 2012 report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life claimed that 20% of the public and 33% of young adults did not have a religious affiliation. Two-thirds of these people say they believe in God, however, and one-third consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious. Unlike in the past, many who are unaffiliated today are not seekers looking for a religious organization to join. Scholars offer a number of explanations for the growing numbers of “nones,” including demographic trends such as generational replacement and postponed marriage and parenthood (Hout & Fischer, 2002; Pew, 2012). As patterns of marriage and family formation change, the small numbers of people raised without religion are less likely to join churches than they were in the past (Hout & Fischer, 2002). At the same time, the increasing identification of churches and religiosity with conservative politics has encouraged detachment from organized religion among socially moderate and liberal citizens with weaker ties to religion (Fischer & Hout, 2006; Hout & Fischer, 2002; Pew, 2012; Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

It is not just those without religious affiliations who view themselves as spiritual. Most Americans—about 80%—report in surveys that they are both spiritual and religious (Chaves, 2011). A small but growing minority—about 20% of those under 40—say they are spiritual but not religious (Chaves, 2011). Spirituality, for many, describes the private ways they find meaning outside of traditional religious organizations, which people increasingly describe as too focused on money and power. Senses of spirituality come from people’s experiences, sociologist Courtney Bender argues, in her study of metaphysicals or people involved in reiki, yoga, energy healing, and other alterative practices in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Bender, 2010). Sociologist Nancy Ammerman and colleagues describe spirituality differently in their study of how people—who were mostly affiliated with religious organizations—see and experience spirituality in their lives as connected to God, nature, home, work, and other things (Williams, 2010). They find that religion and spirituality may appear in expected and unexpected places, and that people continue to make room for the sacred in their everyday lives (Ammerman, 2010; Williams, 2010).

CONGREGATIONS

All of these demographic changes have influenced the shape of religious organizations and the ways religion is a part of broader secular organizations. Congregations remain the central local-level organization through which many people encounter religion and gather with like-minded others

to worship, socialize, and learn. The National Congregations Study estimated in 2006–2007 that there are more than 300,000 congregations in the contemporary United States. The average congregation has 75 members, while the average person goes to a congregation with 400 members. Recent research suggests that people are increasingly going to a smaller number of larger congregations, perhaps because of suburbanization as well as cultural and economic changes (Chaves, 2011). American congregations exist to serve the spiritual needs of their congregants, and they do so by drawing on a vast resource base of partnerships and connections, such as interfaith coalitions, clergy alliances, service groups, mission programs, and regional and denominational organizations (Ammerman, 2005).

Many scholars of American religion have taken up the question of racial diversity within religious congregations and found that deep racial divides persist, especially among white and African American members of Protestant congregations (Edwards, 2008; Emerson, 2006; Emerson & Smith, 2000). Some research points to specific cases in which religious racial integration has been achieved by developing a congregationally based religious identity among members and drawing on shared rituals and practices (Becker, 1998; Ecklund, 2005a, 2005b; Jenkins, 2003; Marti, 2005, 2009; Stanczak, 2006). Larger studies based on nationally representative data identify a number of specific internal and external factors that influence racial diversity and integration within congregations. Dougherty and Huyser (2008) find that racial diversity is greater in congregations that have been established more recently, are larger in size, have racial reconciliation programs, and are led by clergy of a different race than most members of the congregation. They find the highest levels of diversity in non-Christian religious groups, followed by non-Protestant Christian traditions (Dougherty & Huyser, 2008). Multiracial congregations are also more likely to be located in Western or Eastern regions of the United States, in urban areas, and in communities characterized by racial diversity, higher socioeconomic status, and residential mobility (Dougherty & Huyser, 2008).

Changing demographics related to immigration have led to a number of institutional shifts in local and national religious organizations. While some immigrants have joined existing congregations, others have formed new congregations—although scholars debate whether that is the right way to describe them (Cadge, 2005). Some of these congregations are independent entities, while others are connected to national or international denominations or organizations. As the American Catholic Church has received a growing number of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Philippines (Menjívar, 1999, 2003; Mooney, 2009), it has worked to accommodate these new members by providing a range of non-English

masses and other religious services. Protestant churches are also experiencing such shifts as individual churches receive increasing numbers of immigrants into their congregations, and Korean, Chinese, and African ethnic congregations enter major Protestant denominations (Ecklund, 2005a, 2005b; Kwon, Kim & Warner, 2001; Min & Kim, 2002). There are now Islamic mosques and Buddhist and Hindu temples in most major cities (Hirschman, 2004). Immigrant religious organizations can help immigrants adapt by providing language training, social service provision, and employment networks (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Min, 1992), but they may also strengthen ties to the sending country (Min, 1992) and act as a buffer from society for immigrants who are least incorporated (Cadge & Ecklund, 2006).

Many scholars address how religious congregations affect individual-level political participation, but less is known about how congregations themselves engage in politics. Although congregations exhibit relatively low levels of political engagement, they do offer opportunities for political activity at worship services such as petitioning campaigns, lobbying, demonstrating, and distribute voting guides (Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003). Some evidence suggests that people are more likely to develop skills important to external civic engagement by participating in congregational activities beyond religious service attendance (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006; Lichterman 2008). Mainline Protestants, Black Protestants, and Catholics who spend more hours participating in congregation activities outside of religious services are more likely to participate in other “bridging” organizations that build linkages among different groups in communities (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006). This is not the case for Evangelicals, lending support to the idea that some religious groups, which may cultivate strong internal ties but few external ties, may not provide benefits to the broader community (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006).

SPECIAL PURPOSE GROUPS

Religious special purpose groups have expanded in recent decades around a range of diverse issues. Special purpose groups are distinct from other religious institutions in their orientation to achieving focused objectives, and mobilizing resources and support to attain them (Wuthnow, 1988). According to Wuthnow (1988), special purpose groups, “focus on limited objectives, attract participants with special interests, and generally do not constitute the main arenas in which the worship and instruction of the church as a corporate body take place” (p. 108). With the rise of the “New Christian Right” in the 1980s, many special purpose groups were established around conservative policy aims, while others formed around religious constituencies with specialized talents, skills, occupations or hobbies.

The proliferation of special purpose groups between the 1960s and the present was a result of the professionalization of religious workers, the imitation of secular organizations, rising levels of affluence and leisure time, and most importantly, the expanding influence of the state in areas of welfare, education, equal rights, and other policy arenas (Wuthnow, 1988). In response to the actions of the state, special interest groups have formed to limit, oppose, or promote different types of government action on a variety of issues from advocating for school prayer to enforcing separation of church and state (Wuthnow, 1988). Observers of the dramatic growth in special purpose groups debate both the costs and benefits of these developments. While special purpose groups have the potential to revitalize American religious institutions, there is also the danger that they fracture religious communities along the social and political cleavages and controversies evident in the wider society (Wuthnow, 1988).

Special purpose groups also provide a venue through which immigrants and others new to American shores can stake their claim to a piece of American civic life beyond congregations. Groups of Muslims, for example, have created Muslim community health organizations through which to normalize their differences and advance personal and communal interests. These organizations enable founders to express personal piety outside the traditional institution of the mosque and to participate in the American civil society tradition of faith-based organizations (Laird & Cadge 2010). Hindu Americans have established anti-defamation leagues that combat negative portrayals of Hinduism and lobbying groups that work to achieve public recognition for Hinduism as an American religion (Kurien, 2006, p. 730).

OUTSIDE OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to focusing on American religious organizations, it is important to consider how broad demographic changes shape the ways people experience religion in nonreligious organizations. Health care organizations, for example, frequently make space for spirituality and religion in chapels, meditation, and/or prayer rooms, and employ chaplains who work with patients and families from a range of religious backgrounds, including none. Wendy Cadge's recent book traces the history of religion in contemporary health care organizations, illustrating the multiple spaces in which it is present and the competing ways it is conceived and acted on by healthcare staff (2013).

Secular universities, prisons, airports, and the military also have chapel, meditation, and prayer rooms and chaplains who are responsible for addressing religion and spirituality in its multiple guises (Beckford, 2001, Beckford & Gilliat-Ray, 1998; Brand, 2012). As religion becomes more visible on college campuses, a number of universities are managing religious diversity and

“inviting” religion into the university by creating new physical spaces to meet religious and spiritual needs among students (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Kazanjian, 2006). Some universities have renovated historically Christian chapels to serve students from a range of religious and spiritual backgrounds, while others have opened up new spirituality centers to accommodate multiple religious and secular ethical organizations (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Kazanjian, 2006; Riess, 2008). In his study of evangelical Christians, Michael Lindsay has shown how networks facilitate the movement of evangelical Christians across social institutions and shape their experiences in secular, high-status positions (Lindsay, 2007). Other scholars have focused on how religious discourse and practice can provide progressive activists, organizers, and movements with important resources to work for social change (Hart, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008; Lichterman, 2005, 2008; Nepstad Erickson, 2008; Wood, 2002). In order to fully understand the presence of religion and its impact on contemporary American society, scholars must continue to trace its influence in spheres outside of explicitly religious organizations.

RELIGION IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

Any account of institutional change in the United States is incomplete without attention to immigration, globalization, and transnational connections. Many existing American religious organizations are part of larger transnational structures with branches of the same organization located in different parts of the world. Scholars of migration typically characterize transnationalism as the “back-and-forth movements” of immigrants between sending and receiving countries (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999, p. 219). Religion, however, often acts as a network connecting people and places, and many Americans belong to transnational religious groups that are deliberately constituted across national borders (Levitt, 2001, 2004; Wuthnow & Offutt, 2008). Taking these factors into account, transnational scholars such as Levitt (2007) argue that religious diversity can be shaped as much by forces at work outside American borders as within them, and that religion is no longer rooted in a specific country or legal system.

Even though most American churches are still locally oriented, more American congregations and individual Christians now engage in charity work, construction projects, education, evangelization, and relief efforts abroad (Wuthnow, 2009). The Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, and international meetings of Presbyterians and Baptists represent a few of the most visible examples of traditional transnational religious organizations. Newer transnational connections are less centrally organized and have emerged through the mission efforts of smaller congregations, the

development of personal ties, and short-term international visits (Wuthnow & Offutt, 2008). Immigrant groups have also recreated transnational religious organizations within the United States. For example, Gujarati Hindu groups have established home-country-based programs that formalize and reinforce homeland ties with guidance from home-country leaders or local Indian religious leaders (Levitt, 2004, p. 13).

In a cutting-edge example of how scholars are responding to the complexity of studying transnational religion, Mooney (2009) focuses on the experiences of the Catholic Haitian diaspora in Miami, Montreal, and Paris. Through this comparative work, Mooney shows how different national and political contexts shape the ability of religious organizations to mediate between immigrants and their host societies. Although the Haitians in her study share similar beliefs and expressions of religious piety across locations, the ways in which their faith enables them to confront their socioeconomic conditions depends on how leaders interact with other institutions in the United States, Canada, and France.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Scholars of religion have closely examined how shifts in religious beliefs, practices, affiliations, and politics influence the growth and decline of different American religious institutions. They paint a vivid picture of how recent demographic shifts, including new waves of immigration and growing religious diversity, shape religious—and nonreligious—organizations and the contexts in which they develop. Although scholars recognize the increasing number of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims on American shores, as well as the diversification of American Christianity, most research still holds Protestant congregations as the organizational model against which non-Protestant and non-Christian groups are measured. This model has clear limitations when describing the complexity and nuance of new institutional developments on American soil. As Penny Edgell argues in a recent article, “the sociology of religion has developed a disproportionate focus on empirical studies of American Protestantism” that needs to be corrected to fully understand how people in the US experience and practice their religions (2012, p. 243). In the future, we particularly encourage scholars to focus on people and traditions from across the religious spectrum. Doing so not only more accurately reflects the ways religion is lived and experienced in the States but also challenges the conventional categories and concepts through which scholars have studied religion in the United States (Bender *et al.*, 2013).

Asking better questions about religion in organizations other than congregations can also help the study of American religion better represent institutional and religious realities. Current research tends to exaggerate the role of

congregations in American life because it overlooks the larger organizational fields and social settings in which these religious institutions are embedded (Bender *et al.*, 2013). In the past few decades, scholars have directed important attention to religious life outside of congregations through studies of “lived” or “everyday” religion (Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2003). However, this research often conceptualizes religious actions outside of congregations as complementary or resistant to congregational and voluntary organizational religion (see McGuire, 2008) rather than taking place on its own terms. By focusing only on religious organizations, scholars miss opportunities to examine how supposedly secular spaces are shaped formally and informally by changes in contemporary American religion. Secular institutions such as universities, health care organizations, prisons, and the military are all influenced by shifting religious demographics in ways that deserve further attention in studies of American religion—not only through the regulatory policies that may enable, mandate, or limit the exercise of religion but also through the personal beliefs and practices that students or staff members bring into these social settings.

Finally, without situating studies of the United States in a broader global context, it is impossible to theorize beyond the American context. According to Smilde and May (2010), over 70% of all US journal articles on religion focus on religious dynamics in the United States. This becomes problematic when trying to distinguish general properties of religious identity, belief, and processes from the US context, or when applying findings from the United States to other regions of the world. As evident in the work of Mooney (2009), comparative transnational studies enable scholars to identify relationships between religion, the society, and the state that would otherwise be invisible within a single-country study. “Provincializing” the United States and looking to scholarship on non-US contexts will help researchers both identify the limitations of American frameworks and comprehend the extent to which “national” aspects of religious life are in fact transnational (Bender *et al.*, 2013). Moving forward, we hope that sociological research on religion will be less preoccupied with bounding religion in specific spaces, institutions, or organizational forms, and will, in the words of Bender *et al.*, “abandon its assumptions about the places and processes where religion allegedly ‘lives’ and empirically study where it rears its head” (2013, p. 291).

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