Religion and the Nonprofit Sector

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The study of religion has a long history in the social sciences, figuring prominently in the work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Alexis de Tocqueville, William James, and Sigmund Freud, among others. Building on these early contributions, social scientists generally regard religion as one of society's core institutions, just as they do the family, the economy, or the system of government, rather than as part of the nonprofit sector. As a social institution, "religion" thus refers to such organizations as churches, mosques, temples, denominations, and religious movements and the beliefs and practices associated with these organizations, such as belief in God and the practice of participating in religious rituals. Broadly conceived, religion is oriented toward the attainment of meaningful understandings of and relationships with the transcendent. Religious activities and values are expressed in a wide variety of social spheres such as the home, government, business, entertainment, and the arts and in social movements as well as private devotional behavior. Whereas religious organizations generally fit the profile of voluntary associations that involve membership and support from members, they do not so easily fit definitions of nonprofit organizations based on registration with tax authorities (P. Hall 1999). In fact, the literature about religious organizations, beliefs, and practices has until recently paid relatively little attention to questions about nonprofits or the nonprofit sector. Thus, until at least the early 1990s, there was a notable disjuncture between studies of religion and research concerning the nonprofit sector. Only in recent years has this disjuncture been bridged.

Several reasons for the earlier neglect of religion's relation to the nonprofit sector can be noted. For many years, social scientists held the view that religion was of diminishing importance in modern societies. In some interpretations religious involvement itself was assumed to be declining, whereas in more thoughtful arguments religion was assumed to play a declining role in society as more specialized organizations developed (Chaves 1994; Gorski 2000). This assumption was particularly relevant to the way in which activities in the nonprofit sector were understood. For instance, textbooks about social welfare services generally acknowledged that religion had played a role in providing these services in earlier times but that they were now provided by specialized nonprofit and governmental organizations run by professionally trained specialists. Similarly, it was easy to assume that arts organizations, nonprofit hospitals, and private colleges had perhaps been associated with religion at the time of their founding but were no longer influenced by religion. Two related assumptions also help account for the lack of attention to religion in the literature concerning nonprofits. One is the view that as organizations become professionalized, they also become isomorphic. By implication, even nonprofit organizations that may have religious ties can thus be understood in the same terms that other organizations can, rather than requiring special treatment. The other assumption is that the issues of greatest concern have to do with nonprofit management and thus pertain less to religious organizations, since they are managed by clergy and lay committees, than to such nonprofits as museums, hospitals, and colleges.

All of these assumptions have been challenged during the past two decades in ways that make it imperative for religion to be understood as a vital aspect of the nonprofit sector. Approximately half of all philanthropic donations in the United States from individuals go to religious organizations, and participation in these organizations is a strong predictor of volunteering and other forms of community service. Researchers have begun to explore a wide range of questions
about the relations between religion and the nonprofit sector: the historical role played by religion in the formation of the nonprofit sector, tensions between religious and nonreligious organizations within this sector, the ways in which religious organizations are being influenced by growth in the wider nonprofit sector, and relations between religious congregations and faith-based nonprofit organizations, to name a few. Interest in these questions has clearly been reinforced by public policy debates. Beginning with the welfare reforms of the mid-1990s, government leaders have called for greater public recognition of the role of religious organizations as service providers. New legislation and funding opportunities have emerged. In the process, scholars have paid more attention to the role that religious organizations were already playing in service provision. In addition, scholars have also challenged the received wisdom that religion could be understood chiefly in terms of congregations, denominational structures, and formal participation. One line of investigation suggested that “lived religion” happened outside of religious organizations, for instance, in homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and hospital rooms (D. Hall 1997). Another line of investigation suggested that growth of the nonprofit sector since the early 1960s was now affecting the structure and activities of religious organizations. For instance, they were increasingly spinning off nonprofit organizations of their own, developing ties with nonsectarian nonprofits, and becoming subject to tax laws and other public policies governing nonprofits (Ammeter 2005; Wuthnow 2004). In simplest terms, a local church that a few decades ago may have been an autonomous religious organization now functioned quite differently because it was part of a rich network of community agencies, initiated a nonprofit foster care program, received literature from special interest lobbying organizations, filed information about taxes and employee benefits, co-sponsored performances with the local arts council, and organized volunteers at a local hospital.

Because of these developments, it is probably safe to say that most scholars who are interested in the nonprofit sector now recognize the importance of taking religious organizations into consideration. Understanding the role of religion, though, presents a significant challenge. Although instances can be found of studies in which religion is valuably considered in simplistic ways (such as including a variable about religious participation in a survey), religions are complex sets of organizations and practices with long traditions, distinct languages, and specialists of their own. In the United States alone, for instance, twelve hundred separate denominations exist, and the diversity of American religion has increased dramatically in recent decades as a result of new immigration involving large numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and non-Western versions of Christianity (Wuthnow 2005). In addition to the many seminaries and theological schools that specialize in understanding the various religious traditions, a growing number of religious studies departments and research centers have been established in colleges and universities. Conversations with scholars interested in other aspects of the nonprofit sector suggest that their lack of attention to religion stems less from indifference than from a sense of being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of knowledge they would need in order to understand religion.

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the aspects of religion in the United States that are likely to be of greatest relevance to scholars interested in the nonprofit sector. There is a huge and growing literature, produced largely by sociologists of religion, on which to draw. Because this literature has remained separate from the literature about nonprofit organizations until fairly recently, we begin with a brief historical overview of the ways in which religion preceded and contributed to the rise of the nonprofit sector in the United States, especially through provision of social services, relief efforts, and hospitals. Throughout its history, religion in America has been influenced by the nation’s tradition of church-state separation. This tradition made it possible for religious organizations to flourish but also shaped their role in providing social services. These relationships have become increasingly important in scholarship concerned with government provision of resources to the nonprofit sector. We thus include a section that traces some of the more important aspects of these complex relations between government and religion. Turning to the present, we then summarize research that shows how extensively religion is practiced in the United States, how it is organized, and how religious organizations relate to other nonprofit organizations. Subsequent sections take up the specific issues that have generated the greatest interest in recent years among scholars and practitioners concerned with the relations between religion and the nonprofit sector. These include faith-based service organizations and congregations, charitable choice legislation and welfare reform, religion and public advocacy, the transnational aspects of religious organizations, and the role of religion in facilitating giving and volunteering. Each of these topics has recently been the focus of considerable research. The chapter concludes by discussing some of the conceptual and empirical questions that need to be addressed in future research concerning religion and the nonprofit sector. No single theoretical perspective has emerged that unifies the research that has been conducted regarding these various topics. It is nevertheless becoming evident that the organizational forms that characterize American religion are increasingly diverse and that this diversity is in part attributable to the increasingly complex relationships that have emerged between religious organizations and other aspects of the nonprofit sector. Thus, a secondary aim of the present chapter is to encourage scholars to pay greater attention to conceptual and theoretical insights that may emerge from bringing the study of religion and the study of nonprofit organizations into closer alignment. The chapter is primarily concerned with research about religion and the nonprofit sector in the United States. Readers are therefore cautioned that religion plays a much larger role in the United States than it does in many other industrialized societies. At the same time, organized religion appears to be growing in Latin America, Africa, and parts of...
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Asia, and this growth is not unrelated to the transnational activities of religious organizations in the United States (Jenkins 2002; Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001).

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF RELIGION AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

Research concerning ancient, late antique, medieval, and early modern societies indicates that religion played an important role in organizing the kinds of social services that are now provided by nonprofit organizations, for instance, assistance for the poor, emergency relief, hospital care, and managing orphanages. Provision for the poor was institutionalized in the Hebrew Scriptures and in rabbinic teachings (Weber 1952). Under Constantine, the early Christian church received alms and established hospitals, a practice that spread widely from that time until the high Middle Ages (Mollat 1986). In early modern Europe, the Protestant reformers took control of relief chests and worked closely with municipal authorities to regulate access to welfare provision (N. Davis 1968; Kingdon 1971; Jutte 1981). In early modern Japan, Buddhist temples provided legal asylum as well as social services in local villages (Vesey 1999). In several Muslim countries, zakat (poor’s due) was a central teaching that required Muslims whose financial situation was above a specified minimum to pay two and a half percent of income and liquid assets to help support the impoverished and unemployed (Cizikca 2000).

In the American colonies, religious leaders admonished followers to be, in the words of John Winthrop, “models of Christian charity” and founded churches that supplied relief to the poor as well as places in which to hold public meetings (Hammack 1998). When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States in the 1830s, the nation was experiencing a reawakening of religious interest as a result of revivalist efforts on the expanding frontier in upstate New York, Ohio, and Kentucky (Cross 1956; P. Johnson 1978). Counties in which revivalism was present disproportionately became centers of abolitionist activity and showed distinctive voting patterns well after the Civil War (Hammund 1978). Religious organizations provided the impetus in these years for the first national benevolent societies and temperance crusades, efforts that not only addressed issues of public concern but also forged federations among voluntary associations (Rogers 1996; Young 2002). The associational activity that Tocqueville credited with tempering self-interest and undergirding American democracy was often located in church basements and fellowship halls (Tocqueville 1942). At the same time, religious communities engaged in conflict with one another, sought to keep out new immigrants, and often encouraged intolerance toward racial, ethnic, and religious minorities (Niebuhr 1929).

During the Civil War, religious organizations played a large role in the development of the U.S. Sanitary Commission and other relief organizations that were mobilized by ladies’ auxiliaries to supply clothing, food, and medical supplies to military units (Wuthnow 1999). After the war, African American churches became important community centers and served as staging grounds for the subsequent exodus of many black Americans to northern industrial cities (Giggie 1997). African American churches played a significant role in giving women a voice in religious and community affairs through the formation of local and regional “sisterhoods” (Higginbotham 1993). More generally, churches and synagogues gained strength during the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of missionary or congregation-planting efforts and the founding of new immigrant congregations, as well as from the gradual formation of centralized denominational administrative structures. Between 1870 and the end of World War I, the number of local churches grew from little more than 70,000 to more than 225,000. During the same period, the number of church buildings increased from 63,000 to 203,000, and the total value of these buildings mushroomed from $354 million to nearly $1.7 billion, far outstripping growth in population or inflation rates (Wuthnow 1988:22). Historical research suggests that denominational competition, revivalism, and strong leadership were key elements in this growth (Finke and Stark 1992; Christiano 1987). Although this growth contributed to the religious vitality of European Americans, it often had less favorable implications for Native Americans, resulting, for instance, in displacement to new locations and efforts to resocialize youth in church-sponsored boarding schools (J. Martin 1999).

The rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration that took place between 1890 and 1920 were accompanied by renewed, albeit only partially effective, efforts by religious groups to address the growing needs of the urban poor (Hall 1990). The Salvation Army was one of the most notable of these efforts, utilizing full-time religious workers and holding innovative rallies and fundraisers to generate support (Winston 1999). Religious leaders also developed urban ministries through the YMCA andYWCA and through settlement house efforts, many of which were initiated or supported by churches (Weisenfeld 1998). As social needs became too great for private charities to address, religious leaders also turned increasingly to municipalities and other governmental agencies to supply welfare assistance (Olasky 1992; Kaufman 2002). Yet it was also in this period that many of the nation’s religious architectural landmarks were built as lasting symbolic reminders of the presence of religion in the public square and the historic role of religion in encouraging sacred music and the visual arts (Chidester and Linenthal 1995; P. Williams 1997).

Although religious organizations drew an increasing proportion of the population as members during the first half of the twentieth century, this period also witnessed increasing competition from nonsectarian voluntary associations (Skocpol 1999; Putnam 2000; Smith 2003). Museums and orchestras emerged in larger cities, private foundations were established, and Masonic temples as well as such civic organizations as Rotary, Kiwanis, and the Federation of Women’s Clubs offered alternatives to the churches (DiMaggio 1992). During the same period, the share of col-
leges and universities that were operated by religious organizations declined precipitously compared to the share of those sponsored by state governments, church-related colleges increasingly severed historic ties binding them closely to denominations, and hospitals run by religious organizations played a smaller role in healthcare delivery than did nonsectarian hospitals (Freeland 1992; Marsden 1994; Burtchall 1998).

After World War II, religion in the United States competed increasingly with other phenomena—not only voluntary associations but also television, sports, and the entertainment industry—for the public’s loyalties. But religion flourished during the 1950s and early 1960s in response to Cold War insecurities and as part of the postwar building boom; the large number of families with young children whose parents were apparently persuaded, with the popular slogan of the day, that the “family that prays together stays together” also appears to have added a “demographic factor” to this religious vitality (Wuthnow 1988, 1998). Membership in congregations and attendance at religious services grew to record numbers, and a kind of civic religion that equated God and country prevailed (Glock and Stark 1965:68-83; Bellah 1970:168-91). Critics suggested that religion in America was relatively shallow but saw participation in religion as an antidote to the mass culture that threatened to weaken American democracy (Herberg 1955).

Apart from the specific services provided by religious organizations, one of the most significant contributions to the growth of the nonprofit sector during the first two centuries of the nation’s existence was an ethos of voluntarism or self-help and the development of a strong civic sphere that was only loosely associated with government (Stackhouse 1990). Whereas trade unions, socialist movements, and corporatist-style government encouraged more centralized polities in many European societies, the American tradition of locally oriented and denominationally pluralistic religion contributed to a more decentralized, associationist system of government. At the same time, it is also apparent that many of the social functions currently attributed to the nonprofit sector—from services for the poor to the administration of colleges and hospitals, and from providing space for public meetings to supporting the arts—were at one time performed to a significant extent by religious organizations. Long before social scientists and policy makers identified “nonprofits” as composing a distinct social sector, religion offered ways of carrying out social activities that differed from those of either the marketplace or government (Watt 1991).

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHURCH AND STATE

The overall prominence (and, indeed, the growth) of religion in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is often attributed to the fact that America, unlike many western European countries, has never had a state church. Separation of church and state is one of the nation’s distinctive characteristics. It not only ensures that religious organizations have to compete with one another; it also influences religion’s relation to the nonprofit sector. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss rulings concerning church-state relations in detail; however, a brief summary shows that such rulings have played an important role in determining the extent of religious organizations’ involvement in providing community services. As the role of federal government has expanded, church-state rulings have also governed the extent to which tax, employment, and nondiscrimination policies that apply to other nonprofit organizations would apply to religious ones. These rulings, in particular, have shaped the context for recent policy initiatives involving so-called faith-based social service provision.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religious expression and protection against government establishment of religion. After much debate, the final formulation of this clause, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of Religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” was presented in the first session of Congress in September 1789 and was ratified by the requisite number of states by December 1791. Although the meaning of these clauses has been contested from the beginning, the First Amendment has in practice created strong inhibitions against the mingling of religion and government. Separationists interpret these clauses to mean that the government may not benefit or burden religious expression and may not endorse or sponsor religious beliefs or activities; the government should consider religion when making policy to assure that religious organizations or individuals with certain religious beliefs are not singled out for differential treatment. Accommodationists, on the other hand, argue that the government should accept religion and religious groups as central parts of American society and should play the role of a “pragmatic reconciler” in the contested area of church-state relations (Fowler et al. 1999).

Before 1940, states were primarily responsible for granting religious rights and liberties within their boundaries. The First Amendment applied only to the federal government, and Congress passed few laws related to religious expression and establishment. The majority of state constitutions contained a clause protecting liberty or the right of conscience, and 25 states specifically included a free exercise clause. States without such constitutional protection, however, were free to discriminate on the basis of religion. The Supreme Court heard its first free exercise case, Reynolds v. United States, in 1879 and decided to uphold a federal law prohibiting polygamy, thereby denying a Mormon’s free exercise claim.1 In its first establishment clause case, Bradfield v. Roberts (1899), the Supreme Court also found no First Amendment violation, ruling that funds available from Congress to build new hospitals could be awarded to a nonprofit hospital incorporated and run by an order of nuns under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church.2 The Court also reviewed a number of state and local laws related to religion and ruled on church property and policy during this period (Witte 2000).3

After 1940 the Court applied the First Amendment’s religion clause to the states, shifting responsibility for religious liberty from the states to the federal government. In a free
exercise case, *Cantwell v. Connecticut* (1940), the Court first applied the religion clause of the First Amendment to a local ordinance in order to overturn an ordinance that prohibited Jehovah’s Witnesses from proselytizing.\(^4\) Court decisions in establishment clause cases changed markedly with the ruling in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947).\(^3\) Drawing from the First Amendment’s religion clause and the Fourteenth Amendment’s due process clause, the Court decided that states that provided bus service to children in religious and public schools were not establishing religion. Although public money could not be used to support religious organizations or programs directly, it could be used indirectly (Monahan 1996). The *Everson* decision was reinforced in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) when the Supreme Court ruled that public money could not be used to subsidize teachers in religious schools for teaching secular subjects.\(^5\) These three decisions and others that followed made clear that the First Amendment applied both to the states and to the federal government. States also maintained a full docket of religion cases during this period, adjudicating them on the basis of state constitutions and the guidance of the Supreme Court.

Since 1940 the Supreme Court has handed down more than 150 decisions regarding free exercise and establishment clause cases, many of which apply directly to the workings of nonprofit organizations. In early cases, for example, the Court ruled that religious groups must have autonomy to decide internal disputes and that state courts must defer to the highest religious authorities in such cases.\(^7\) In *Jones v. Wolf* (1979),\(^4\) the Court reversed these decisions, however, ruling that intrachurch debates could be resolved using “neutral principles of law.” In recent free exercise cases, the Supreme Court has come to a narrow reading of the free exercise clause. This reading was most evident in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990).\(^9\) In this case Smith, a Native American, consumed peyote as part of a rite performed in the Native American Church, to which he belonged. As a result, he was discharged from his job as a drug rehabilitation counselor and applied for unemployment benefits from the state of Oregon. The state denied his request, arguing that consuming peyote was illegal, and disqualified him from receiving benefits. The Supreme Court upheld the state’s view, narrowly defining religious practices that are protected under the free exercise clause in the process. This narrow reading was challenged by Congress in the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, but in 1997 the Court struck down the act as it applies to the states.\(^10\)

In establishment cases, the Court has moved in the opposite direction, shifting from a single narrow principle of church-state relations to a more multiprincipled reading. The Court struck down release-time programs for religious instruction in public schools,\(^11\) prayer,\(^12\) Bible reading,\(^13\) and religious symbols\(^14\) in early cases that focused largely on the public schools. Since 1980 the Court has broadened its establishment decisions to include new principles of religious equality, though Court decisions in this area remain particularly inconsistent.

State and federal legislation concerning taxes, financial reporting requirements, employment practices, and local zoning also influence the formation and functioning of religious and nonreligious nonprofit organizations. Some religious nonprofits, most notably churches, are treated differently from nonreligious nonprofits by the IRS, though both types of nonprofits are exempted from paying income tax. Federal and state governments have been hesitant to define “religion” for tax purposes, and their definitions have been much debated in state courts. The IRS asks two questions: Are the “particular religious beliefs of the organization . . . truly and sincerely held?” And are “the practices and rituals associated with the organizations’ religious belief or creed . . . not illegal or contrary to clearly defined public policy?” (Internal Revenue Service 1999b). In 1983, for example, the Supreme Court upheld the IRS’s decision to revoke the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University because its discriminatory racial policies were contrary to public policy.\(^15\) Despite their tax exemptions, churches have been required since 1969 to pay tax on unrelated business income or income from trades or businesses not substantially related to the basis of the organizations’ exemption (Internal Revenue Service 1999c). Federal regulations also stipulate that many clergy members are exempt from certain wage and payroll taxes (Internal Revenue Service 1999a; Martin and Miller 1998). At the state level, tax regulations for churches and religious organizations vary. Property tax exemptions are granted by all states, though specific laws differ (Bookman 1992).

With respect to employment issues and zoning, some religious nonprofits, such as churches, are subject to specific regulations. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and later amendments include an exemption that allows some religious groups to use religion as a criterion in employment decisions. This exemption was upheld in *Corporation of the Presiding Bishop of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints v. Amos* (1987)\(^16\) when the Supreme Court ruled that a religious employer need not retain an employee who had lapsed from its faith (Witte 2000). Property zoning at the local level has also influenced the development and functioning of religious organizations, especially those new to American shores. Throughout Southeast Asia, for example, Buddhist temples are both religious gathering places and residences for monks. When Vietnamese Buddhists in California began to have religious gatherings in their homes in the 1980s and 1990s, neighbors complained about traffic and the sound of prayers and chants in the residential areas where these “home temples” were located. Private homes in these areas were not allowed to be used for religious gatherings without a conditional use permit and without meeting certain safety requirements (Dixon 1996; Breyer 1993). Other Buddhist temples and religious groups formed by recent immigrants present similar challenges to city councils and local zoning boards.

As these examples suggest, the laws and policies governing religious organizations in the United States are subject to differing interpretations and are frequently contested. The ebb and flow of restrictions and regulations influences in particular the competitive relationships that often exist in local communities between religious organizations and non-
sectarian nonprofits. Nonsectarian organizations are sometimes at a competitive disadvantage because fewer restrictions apply to religious organizations. Conversely, religious organizations sometimes experience greater difficulty in applying for government funds than do organizations for which separation of church and state is less of an issue.

THE CONTOURS AND DYNAMICS OF AMERICAN RELIGION AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

A great deal of research has been conducted in the past half-century on the general contours and dynamics of American religion, including studies of the memberships of various denominations and religious traditions, the religious beliefs and attendance patterns of the public, alliances and divisions among various religious communities, trends in religious commitment, and comparisons with other countries. This research demonstrates that religious organizations are more numerous and command more time and financial contributions than any other kind of nonprofits do. It also demonstrates that religious organizations differ from many kinds of nonprofit organizations in depending on voluntary contributions instead of third-party payments. Although much of this research goes well beyond considerations of the nonprofit sector, the strength and character of American religion are of relevance to any consideration of the nonprofit sector (Biddle 1992; James and Ackerman 1986; James 1993; Corbin 1999).

According to figures from the Gallup Organization (which has examined religion over a longer period of time and in greater detail than any other research center), 59 percent of Americans identify their religious preference as Protestant, 27 percent as Catholic, and 1 percent each as Orthodox, Mormon, or Jewish; only 6 percent say they have no religious preference (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). Polls have thus far not provided reliable figures about membership in other religious organizations, although some estimates suggest that as many as four to six million Muslims, two to four million Buddhists, and more than one million Hindus live in the United States (T. Smith 2002; Committee on the Study of Religion 2005). Among Protestants, more than half are affiliated with evangelical denominations, the largest of which is the Southern Baptist Convention with approximately 16 million members, and the remainder including such groups as Assemblies of God, Church of Christ, and various Pentecostal, Holiness, and independent churches. Approximately one-third of Protestants belong to the historically mainline denominations (United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, and American Baptist), and the remainder belong to predominately black denominations (such as African Methodist Episcopal, National Baptist Convention, and Churches of God in Christ).

During the 1970s and 1980s, membership in mainline denominations and in Jewish congregations declined by as much as one-quarter, largely because of demographic factors (fewer children and greater spacing between generations), while membership in evangelical denominations increased (Kelley 1986; Hout, Greeley, and Wilde 2001). During the late 1990s, in contrast, the rate of decline in mainline denominations diminished to near zero, and the rate of growth in most larger evangelical denominations was significantly smaller than in the earlier period (Wuthnow and Evans 2002). Among Catholics, the largest shift during the last third of the twentieth century was a substantial increase in the proportion of Hispanic and Latino or Latina members (estimated to be as high as one-quarter of American Catholics; Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo 1998). Theological and subcultural boundaries continued to separate Protestants from Catholics, Christians from Jews, and black Christians from white Christians; however, these boundaries were also weakened by higher rates of intermarriage, new contexts for interaction (such as college campuses), declining commitment to creedal traditions, and interfaith coalitions.

More than two-thirds of adult Americans (69 percent) claim to be members of local congregations, a figure that has remained constant since the late 1970s but is slightly lower than it was in the 1940s and 1950s (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). The median person is in a congregation with 400 regular participants, but the median person is in a congregation with 75 regular participants, and only 10 percent of American congregations have more than 350 regular participants, but those congregations contain almost half of the religious service attendees in the country” (Chaves et al. 1999; see also Chaves 2004).

The proportion of Americans who regularly attend religious services is smaller than the proportion who claim membership in congregations, but researchers disagree about the exact figures (Hadayaw, Marler, and Chaves 1993, 1998; Presser and Stimson 1998; Woodberry 1998). In Gallup surveys, approximately four adults in ten claim to have attended religious services in the seven days prior to being surveyed (Gallup and Lindsay 1999:15). Estimates from the General Social Survey place the figure at approximately 28 percent, or 28 percent if only worship services are considered (T. Smith 1998). Attendance is higher among women than among men, among evangelicals Protestants than among mainline Protestants, Catholics, or Jews, and among older people than among younger people.

Besides attendance at services, participation in small groups sponsored by congregations plays a significant role in the religious lives of many Americans. According to a national study conducted in 1991, 40 percent of adults claimed to be involved in a small group that “meets regularly and provides caring and support for its members,” and two-thirds of this number said their group was formally sponsored by a religious organization (Wuthnow 1994a). Approximately 18 to 22 million adults were estimated to be members of 800,000 Sunday school classes, 15 to 20 million were found to participate in 900,000 Bible studies and
prayer fellowships, and 8 to 10 million were said to be members of 500,000 self-help groups (such as AA, Al-Anon, and ACOA). The average member had participated in his or her group for at least five years, attended every week for at least an hour and a half, and was highly satisfied with the group. Small groups of this kind are sometimes criticized for being short-lived and focusing on individual needs; however, such groups generate social capital in the form of networks and trust, much as community-based nonprofit organizations do (Wuthnow 2004).

In ideological terms, the U.S. public appears to be committed to a core of basic religious values, but specific beliefs show considerable variation. In Gallup surveys, 95 percent of adults claim belief in God or a higher power, 79 percent believe in miracles, and 67 percent believe in life after death (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). In General Social Surveys, 72 percent say they “feel God’s presence” in their daily lives and 76 percent say they “desire to be closer to or in union with God” (Davis et al. 1998). Specific beliefs that show less consensus include beliefs about the Bible, which divide about equally between literalists and nonliteralists, and views of creation and evolution, each being favored by about 40 percent of the public (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). A number of studies conducted since the mid-1980s show that between one-fifth and one-quarter of the public identify their religious views as very conservative, and a roughly equal proportion identify their religious views as very liberal; moreover, religious conservatives and liberals hold negative images of each other and differ dramatically with regard to such issues as abortion and homosexuality (Wuthnow 1988, 1996). Some observers argue that there is a “culture war” in American religion between evangelical Christians and secular humanists (Hunter 1991); others suggest that ideological conflict is more visible in public life than in the beliefs and practices of individuals and congregations (R. Williams 1997; Wolfe 1998; Becker 1999). These religiously rooted ideological divisions influence attitudes toward a wide range of issues relevant to the nonprofit sector, including attitudes about artists and arts organizations, attitudes toward nonprofit organizations concerned with racial equality and sexual preference, and attitudes toward organizations engaged in social service provision (Hunter 1991).

One reason for the visibility of ideological conflict is that special-purpose groups play a greater role in American religion than they did a half-century ago, and many of these groups have aligned themselves with particular identities and ideologies (Wuthnow 1988). Examples range from the Moral Majority, founded by the evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell in the 1980s (Harding 2000), to the more recent Christian Coalition, headed by the television evangelist Pat Robertson, to more local or less influential groups such as the Black Mormon Caucus and the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual. Special-purpose groups often model themselves after other nonprofit organizations, work in concert with those organizations, and conform to the same tax codes and managerial styles.

The possibility that religious commitment is weakening has been much debated. Such weakening could have a wider impact on civil society, since religious involvement correlates positively with other forms of community participation and philanthropy. Arguments about secularization drawn from classical sociological theory suggest that the strength of religion diminishes as societies become more industrialized and pluralistic and better educated (B. Wilson 1966; D. Martin 1976). Yet alternative arguments suggest that religious vitality may be maintained by competition among religious groups or by sheer inertia. Gallup data regarding church attendance, using the largest samples for which such data are available, show no change since the early 1970s (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). Hout and Greeley (1998:118), analyzing General Social Survey data and organization data collected by other investigators, conclude, “Neither their data nor the survey record support the conjecture that church attendance rates in the United States have fallen in recent years.” In contrast, Putnam (2000) and Inglehart and Baker (2000) estimate that church attendance has decreased by four or five percentage points in the past two or three decades. As Putnam observes, a decline of this magnitude is nevertheless quite small compared to the declines in other measures of community participation (such as visiting with neighbors and joining fraternal organizations).

Whether religion in the United States is weakening or holding steady, it is a significantly more influential social presence than in most other advanced industrialized societies. For instance, monthly attendance at religious services in the United States in the late 1990s was 30 percent higher than in Germany or Australia and 39 percent higher than in Sweden; the proportion saying that God was important in their lives was 29 percent higher in the United States than in Australia, 34 percent higher than in Germany, and 42 percent higher than in Sweden (Inglehart and Baker 2000).

On the whole, religious organizations in the United States make up a substantial share of the ways in which the public voluntarily participates in public life. They probably generate more grassroots participation and link this participation to wider networks of social organizations than any other segment of the nonprofit sector (Greeley 1997). Much of American religion has become “privatized,” focusing on personal spiritual journeys and the pursuit of individual religious experiences within congregations (Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1999). Yet it is misleading to describe religion entirely in terms of either personal beliefs or local congregations.

Despite the influence of religion in the United States, researchers have only recently begun to investigate the ways in which religious and secular nonprofit organizations compare on a range of axes. The effectiveness of existing theories of nonprofit organization in explaining the organization and functioning of religious nonprofit organizations is an area where much future research is needed. Existing research reveals differences between religious and secular nonprofit organizations in terms of structure and in terms of service delivery and client satisfaction.

For instance, empirical studies show that religious and secular nonprofit organizations often behave differently. Religious nursing homes are more likely than for-profit or
secular nonprofit nursing homes, for example, to use waiting lists, an indicator of the extent to which religious nursing homes may refrain from acting as for-profit nursing homes do by raising prices until the market clears (Weisbrod 1988, 1998). Religious and secular nonprofits also differ in their approaches to employment and personnel matters. Church-related nonprofit nursing homes and facilities for mentally handicapped people, for example, are found to employ significantly more full- and part-time nurses, dieticians, and maintenance workers than are proprietary homes, perhaps suggesting more concern with patient care or less concern with profit maximization (Weisbrod 1998). Hiring criteria in religious and secular nonprofit organizations also differ. In a study of day care centers in Wisconsin, the directors of religious centers were found to have less management experience but more previous experience with children than were the directors of secular nonprofit centers (Mausser 1993, 1998). And in one study religious nursing homes were found to pay lower wages than secular or for-profit nursing homes (Borjas et al. 1983). Research also shows that trustees of large urban nonprofit hospitals are recruited differently depending on the religious affiliation of the hospital. Whereas Catholic and Jewish hospitals have continued to recruit trustees on the basis of religion and ethnicity, Protestant hospitals have become more like secular hospitals, in which trustees are rarely recruited for religious reasons (Swartz 1998).

Existing research also begins to suggest that service delivery and client satisfaction sometimes differ in religious and secular nonprofit organizations. In a study of nursing homes, Weisbrod found that among clients who were given sedatives, clients in secular nursing homes received significantly more medication than did those in church-owned nonprofit nursing homes. Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982) found that comparable students learn somewhat more in nonprofit than in public schools, although effects differed by student type and for Catholic and other nonprofit schools. Weisbrod (1998) found customer satisfaction to be higher in religious nursing homes and facilities for the mentally handicapped than among clients in similar secular nonprofit organizations. Mausser also found that religious nonprofit day care providers offer higher quality care than do secular providers and that parents have more trust in them (1993, 1998). Morris and Helburn (2000) added further nuance to these results by examining religious, secular, public, and private day care providers. Much research about the distinctions between for-profit and nonprofit organization centers around the role of trust in organizational behavior and exchange. The way trust functions among religious as compared to secular nonprofit organizations is only now beginning to be studied. Wuthnow, Hackett, and Hsu (2004), for instance, compared perceptions of the trustworthiness of faith-based nonprofits, nonsectarian nonprofits, and congregations in a sample of more than two thousand recipients of assistance from these organizations. There were no significant differences between the perceptions of faith-based and nonsectarian nonprofits; however, congregations were perceived as being more trustworthy than the other organizations, and this difference remained when other factors were controlled.

Although it is possible to speculate about the relevance of nonprofit theory to religious organizations, empirical research is insufficient to confirm or disconfirm such speculation at this point. For instance, nonprofit theory suggests that religious organizations provide the kinds of services that are better supplied by nonprofit than by for-profit means: hard to define or measure, value-based services, such as meaning and belonging, assurance about an afterlife, and emotional support. Such services have traditionally been supported by general membership donations, which disconnect payments from specific outcomes. Yet fee-for-service provision has become increasingly popular in some congregations (where it is possible to find price lists indicating specific charges for prayers, funerals, wakes, weddings, choir lessons, and the like). Scholars have also suggested that a kind of market mentality governs religious shopping and that preferences for denominations can be understood in terms of rational-choice calculations. Cultural taboos against the conning of God and mammon, as well as prevailing tax laws, deter religious organizations from functioning on a for-profit basis. But in actual practice the lines separating religious activities from for-profit or other nonprofit activities may be blurred.

**FAITH-BASED NONPROFITS AND CONGREGATIONS**

The topic that has generated more research in recent years about religion than almost any other concerns the role of so-called faith-based nonprofit organizations. Besides the more than three hundred thousand local congregations that presently exist in the United States, thousands of faith-based nonprofit organizations have been founded in recent years (Scott 2002). These are specialized organizations that exist to fulfill such functions as operating homeless shelters and food banks, as opposed to the broad range of liturgical, ritual, and educational functions performed by most congregations. Faith-based service organizations are typically incorporated as 501(c)(3) nonprofits. Examples range from local organizations founded and sponsored by a coalition of congregations, such as a soup kitchen or a day care center, to such national organizations as Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services. Faith-based nonprofits are particularly significant in the present context because they, to a greater extent than congregations, function in cooperative and competitive relationships with other nonprofit organizations. They have many of the same managerial problems and conform to the same legal requirements. They are also more likely than congregations to receive government funding (Monser 1996; Chaves 1999; Glenn 2000; Wuthnow 2004).

Many faith-based nonprofits are *multipurpose organizations* that include a range of activities or programs such as food banks, neighborhood centers, job training programs, and transportation programs and therefore are concerned with coordinating and supervising these various activities. *Church service agencies*, which are semiautonomous ser-
vice arms of a single denomination or confessional tradi-
tion, are one kind of multipurpose faith-based organization. 
These include some of the nation’s largest faith-based ser-
vice providers. Even at the local level, the budgets of these 
organizations often exceed those of large congregations and 
may include substantial receipts from government agencies.
Ecumenical or interfaith coalitions are another kind of mu-
tipurpose faith-based organization. These range from coalitions 
involving a few congregations in a single neighborhood 
to coalitions involving hundreds of congregations 
throughout a region or metropolitan area. Smaller coalitions 
often develop when single congregations cannot effectively 
deliver services; larger coalitions often receive govern-
ment funding and work closely with nonsectarian nonprofit 
agencies.

Other faith-based nonprofits have emerged as direct-ser-
service ministries, which focus less on coordination or supervi-
sion than on immediate relationships with clients, often cen-
tered around a particular activity, such as a homeless shelter 
or a soup kitchen. Usually these are local organizations op-
erating in specific neighborhoods, such as the Fifth Street 
Shelter in New York City or the Waco Care Ministries in 
Waco, Texas. Within the larger category of direct-service 
ministries, church-sponsored ministries retain formal or in-
formal connections with a religious organization and usu-
ally receive financial support from this organization and in 
turn receive influences from that organization in the form 
of board memberships, overlapping staff, or bylaw restric-
tions. A Presbyterian church that runs a local nursing home 
is an example. In contrast, church-initiated organizations 
are more likely to have been started by a religious organiza-
tion or by a pastor or lay member with strong ties to a reli-
gious organization but then become sufficiently autonomous 
that their mission and governance reflect religious values 
only informally. An AIDS counseling program that was 
started with help from a local church but that now operates 
independent of that church is an example.

Faith-based nonprofits form a significant complement to 
the informal service activities and social ministries that take 
place within congregations. The activities in which faith-

based nonprofits engage generally require professional 
training, unlike the volunteer activities performed in congre-
gations. Whereas congregations are concentrated in subur-
ban areas, faith-based nonprofits appear more likely to be 
located in inner-city neighborhoods or in areas closer to 
clients (Wuthnow 2000b). In these areas, faith-based and 
secular nonprofits typically evolve a division of labor that 
minimizes duplication of effort and develop relationships 
with at least several congregations in the wider community 
that supply volunteers and funding or donations in kind 
(Cnaan 2002).

In one study conducted in northeastern Pennsylvania, 
faith-based service agencies and churches referred clients 
back and forth, shared information about them, and worked 
together to channel resources from larger programs to spe-
cific points of delivery in local neighborhoods. But service 
agencies characteristically handled clients that the churches 
were unable or unwilling to deal with and not the converse;
that is, agencies appeared to be helping churches meet needs 
more than churches were helping agencies. This was one of 
the reasons that faith-based agencies had been established 
in the first place. Clergy members recognized that some 
people’s needs required long-term or specialized attention, 
or they knew that too many needs were concentrated in 
some churches while other churches had resources to spare. 
Agency heads were generally pleased that churches were 
able to send them clients. Yet these administrators also com-
plained that churches were sometimes doing too little to care 
for their own. The congregations that were most likely to 
have formal, mutually supportive relationships with faith-
based agencies had larger memberships and budgets, were 
located closer to low-income neighborhoods, and were af-
ferated with mainline Protestant denominations (Wuthnow 

Because they often receive government funding, faith-

based nonprofits typically develop strategies for managing 
possible conflicts of interest between their religiously ori-
ented activities and other programs. These strategies include 
keeping separate budgets for different programs, housing 
programs in different facilities, and referring clients with re-
ligious interests to congregations. It is difficult to know, 
however, whether funds received to support specific services 
also contribute indirectly in some way to the larger religious 
uses of the organizations. The effectiveness of these 
faith-based organizations is still being assessed (Johnson, 
Tomkins, and Webb 2002).

**CHARITABLE CHOICE AND WELFARE REFORM**

The relation between faith-based nonprofit organizations 
and the federal government changed with the passage of the 
charitable choice provision (section 104) of the 1996 wel-
fare law (the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconcilia-
tion Act). This provision aimed to expand the involvement 
of community and faith-based organizations in public anti-
poverty efforts (Center for Public Justice 1997). Prior to pas-
sage of the charitable choice provision, faith-based organi-
izations that administered social service programs generally 
formed separate nonprofit organizations in order to receive 
federal funds. They were also subject to a great deal of am-
biguity about how religious the social services they provided 
could be. The 1996 charitable choice provision required 
states that contract with social service organizations to del-
iver services to the poor to allow faith-based organizations 
to also apply for those contracts. This provision applies to 
money distributed through the Temporary Assistance to 
Needy Families program, or TANF (the program that re-
placed AFDC), to the Supplementary Security Income pro-
gram (SSI), and to food stamps and Medicaid programs that 
are administered through contracts or vouchers. Since the 
law’s initial passage, charitable choice provisions have been 
extended by executive orders to other areas, such as low-in-
come housing programs.

The charitable choice legislation lays out specific re-
quirements for faith-based organizations and the govern-
ment in these partnerships. First, as a condition of receiving
a contract, the state cannot require a religious organization to "alter its form of internal governance" or "remove religious art, icons, scripture, or other symbols" from its buildings. Second, the religious organization retains its independence from federal, state, and local governments, including its "control over the definition, development, practice, and expression of its religious beliefs" throughout the duration of the contract. Third, religious organizations awarded a contract to provide social services can be audited, but they may receive the federal funds in a separate account so that only the "financial assistance provided with such funds shall be subject to audit." Fourth, funds received via the charitable choice provision may not be used for "sectarian worship, instruction, or proselytization." Fifth, faith-based organizations are prohibited from discriminating against individuals receiving their services on the "basis of religion, a religious belief, or refusal to actively participate in religious practice." Religious organizations do, however, retain their right (granted by an exemption clause to the 1964 Civil Rights Act) to hire program staff on the basis of their religious beliefs (although this right has been challenged in the courts).

Finally, the charitable choice legislation stipulates that if a recipient of assistance objects to the religious nature of an organization providing services, the government must find an alternative service provider of the same quality within a reasonable amount of time (Center for Public Justice 1997). Although this legislation requires that states allow faith-based organizations to apply for these government contracts, it does not guarantee that they will be awarded contracts (it is not an affirmative action program).

Charitable choice was a hotly debated issue among religious leaders during the 1996 welfare policy discussions. Those who opposed it were concerned about increased entanglement between church and state and the possibility that organizations involved with charitable choice would drift from their core mission and goals. Some argued that the churches' critical stance toward government would change if they received government money, as would churches' relations with the poor. Others were concerned about excessive government delegation of powers and argued that churches do not have the resources to care for the poor. Many expressed concerns about the constitutionality of the legislation, in particular, the possibility of civil rights abuses occurring when government money is used by organizations that discriminate in employment. Those who supported charitable choice emphasized that it would expand their ability to provide social services to the poor, and some argued that religiously based social service programs are more effective than similar secular programs.

Since the charitable choice legislation was passed in 1996, responses from religious communities have been mixed. In an early nationally representative study, leaders of one-third of congregations in the United States expressed interest in applying for government funds to support social service activities. Very large congregations, Catholic churches, and theologically moderate and liberal Protestant congregations were among those most likely to want to apply. After taking into account other factors, African American congregations were five times more likely than other churches to express interest in public support for their social service activities (Chaves 1999). Fewer than half of congregations included in this study, however, were aware of charitable choice. Other studies also suggest that many religious groups and government officials remain ignorant of the law (Owens 2000; Sherman 2000; Winston 2000). There is also evidence to suggest that some faith-based organizations may not be interested in applying for federal funds via charitable choice because they already receive federal funds and have learned to accommodate their services to the old rules governing faith-based organizations (Locote 2000; Winston 2000).

Researchers have only begun to draw preliminary conclusions about the effects of the charitable choice legislation on the provision of local social services. In a study released by the Center for Public Justice, Amy Sherman reported that charitable choice has resulted in "cooperative relationships between government and the faith community" in at least 23 states. In the 9 states on which she focused specifically, she found 84 new financial collaborations between government and religious social service providers and 41 new nonfinancial relationships formed since 1996. More than half of the financial relationships involved churches and other faith-based organizations that had not previously collaborated with government. These new programs focused largely on faith-based mentoring and job training. In Virginia, for example, the Norfolk Interfaith Partnership, a group of Catholic and Protestant congregations, partnered with the Norfolk Department of Human Services. Together they created the Norfolk Interfaith Partnership, which in part provides welfare-to-work mentoring for families receiving public assistance. In another case, Jewish Family Services in Monroe County, New York, received a grant to provide job training and placement services for TANF clients in their region. There were complaints in only two of the programs that Sherman examined. In both cases, clients felt subtly pressured to attend church, and in both cases the clients were transferred to appropriate secular service providers (Sherman 2000). Additional research points to some of the obstacles to implementing charitable choice. In one case in Philadelphia, Cookman United Methodist Church, its nonprofit service organization, Neighborhood Joy Ministries, and the state had to negotiate a range of issues and misunderstandings—in particular, program guidelines and payment schedules—as a program was implemented (Sinha 2000). Differences in quality between grant applications from religious and secular groups may also be an issue in charitable choice implementation (Farnsley 2001).

The larger point illustrated by the recent history of charitable choice and faith-based initiatives is that government is an important factor in the day-to-day activities of nonprofit organizations. Government provides a significant share of funding for nonprofit organizations, including faith-based organizations. As government funding is appropriated, expectations about the outcomes of nonprofit programs change. For instance, questions about efficiency and effectiveness
are likely to be more important when public funds are involved than in, say, a small religious congregation that prides itself on promoting long-term, caring relationships. Although religious organizations may be said to compete with one another insofar as members and donations are concerned, competition is likely to be more important when these organizations write grants in order to secure funding from limited public pools. Indeed, the fact that larger and wealthier congregations and faith-based nonprofits appear to be the most successful at securing such funding suggests that comparative advantage does become increasingly important.

RELIGION AND PUBLIC ADVOCACY

Tax-exempt nonprofits are prohibited from engaging directly in public advocacy. The nonprofit sector, however, is widely regarded as a kind of free space in which critical ideas can germinate, and religious organizations have taken part. Since the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century, religious groups in the United States have joined secular nonprofits’ attempts to influence public policy at the state and national levels in a range of ways. Religious and non-religious groups were active in the temperance movement, the civil rights movement, and, more recently, in the sanctuary movement’s efforts to protect refugees from Central America (C. Smith 1996). Religious groups have also assisted in mobilizing nativist movements, survivalist organizations, and movements interested in restricting civil liberties (Lipset and Raab 1970; Barkun 1996). The way people vote in elections may be indirectly influenced by contact with poor people through religiously sponsored social service projects or conversations in temples or national denominational meetings. Church-based community organizing has also been a significant form of religious advocacy, mobilizing an estimated one to two million Americans involved in local issues concerned with inequality and social justice by means of intensive congregational education and accountability programs (Warren 2001). Such programs utilize the facilities, leadership, and values of religious organizations to nurture civic skills (Verba et al. 1995). Yet religious advocacy also raises ethical and policy concerns. Many church members believe that churches should provide services at the local level but steer clear of partisan politics for fear of violating the separation of church and state; others believe that advocacy should be done selectively and only after careful consideration within congregations (Wuthnow and Evans 2002). Others express concern about lobbying because of funding issues, though recent evidence drawn from religious and secular nonprofit organizations suggests that the levels of government funding currently in most nonprofits do not suppress their political activities (Chaves, Stephens, and Galaskiewicz 2002).

In addition to congregational advocacy, religious groups have added their voices to national public policy debates by lobbying in Washington, D.C. The United Methodist Church became the first major religious presence in the nation’s capital because of its support for Prohibition in 1916, and in 1943 the Quakers registered the first national religious lobby, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (Hertzke 1988). By 1950 at least 16 religious groups had offices in Washington, D.C., and by 2000 there were more than 100 religious lobbies representing Jewish, Catholic, liberal Protestant, evangelical, African American, and Muslim faiths (Fowler et al. 1999).

The media and the American public became increasingly interested in religious lobbying organizations with the rise of the Christian Right in the late 1970s and 1980s. The Christian Right includes a range of organizations that aim to mobilize conservative Protestants to political participation. These organizations’ messages and constituencies overlapped during the 1980s, with the Moral Majority being the most visible. In 1989, after his failed run for the presidency, Pat Robertson founded the Christian Coalition. With more than 1.5 million members and 1,700 local chapters in all 50 states, the Christian Coalition quickly became one of the best-organized religious lobbying groups. The coalition’s membership has largely consisted of white evangelicals but also includes some conservative Catholics. The group’s lobbying strategy is twofold. First, it founded a Government Affairs Office in Washington, D.C., in 1993 and spent a significant amount of time and resources lobbying there, primarily regarding conservative economic issues. Second, the group became involved in every aspect of electoral politics. It worked to influence decisions about who received party nominations and then provided training for the candidate, his campaign manager, and his finance director. Most significant, the Christian Coalition sought to influence the outcome of elections by preparing and distributing voter guides and mobilizing voters at the grass roots. Although federal tax regulations stipulate that these guides must include each candidate’s positions, it was often clear from the way the positions were presented which candidate the coalition supported (Moen 1992; Wilcox 1992; Watson 1997). Increasingly, this and other conservative Christian organizations have adopted a strategy of proliferating separate nonprofit organizations for specific purposes. For instance, a large, well-funded local congregation may have a separate nonprofit entity to support its television ministry, another nonprofit organization to solicit tax-deductible contributions for charitable programs, a nonprofit educational organization to train ministers, and a non-tax-exempt nonprofit through which to engage in lobbying. With tens of millions of dollars at their disposal, such organizations function more as national and international conglomerates do than as traditional congregations.

Following a more centralized model of organization, American Catholics have also added their voices to public dialogue, largely through the pastoral letters of American bishops. Before the Second Vatican Council took place in the early 1960s, Catholic bishops were involved in politics mostly at the local level. After World War II, the National Catholic Welfare Conference was formed in Washington, D.C., but it was not directly tied into the hierarchy of the
Catholic Church. After Vatican II, American bishops realized that they needed to strengthen their national presence if they wanted to have an impact on American politics. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) was subsequently created by the highest church authority, and all American bishops were required to join. The conference was granted authority apart from the authority of individual bishops (Byrnes 1991). The conference was active in the presidential elections of 1976 and 1984, and its antiabortion position has been advanced by many groups since Roe v. Wade was decided in 1973. In the 1980s the conference's most significant statements focused on modern war, nuclear weapons, and the U.S. economy. Drawing from the long tradition of Catholic social thought, the Challenge of Peace (1983) prohibited the first use of nuclear weapons and stressed deterrence as a step toward disarmament. In Economic Justice for All: Catholic Teaching and the U.S. Economy (1986), the bishops argued that all people have a right to participate in the economic life of society and all members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable. The bishops also emphasized specific policy proposals such as coordinating fiscal monetary policy to achieve full employment and expanding job training programs. The 1983 statement led some American bishops to get involved in the 1984 presidential elections, and the 1986 statement was widely discussed among Catholics and non-Catholic alike. Statements made after Vatican II were generally more influential in American politics than those made before the council occurred because they had the full weight of the Catholic Church behind them (Byrnes 1991; Warner 1995).

Jewish lobbying groups have also enjoyed success, in part because of their resources and their access to political elites. A range of Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations are dedicated to presenting Jewish perspectives on a range of issues (Fowler et al. 1999). These groups have traditionally supported the strict separation of church and state and have been liberal with regard to civil liberties issues (Hertz 1988; Fowler et al. 1999). In a class by itself, the secular American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has worked since its founding in 1954 to "keep Israel safe and secure and strengthen the country's friendship with the United States" by "advancing the peace process, strengthening Israel through military and economic aid, and protecting Jerusalem as the capital of Israel." At present, the group has a grassroots membership of 50,000, a staff of more than 100, several paid lobbyists, and a multimillion-dollar annual budget. The group works largely through key contacts and has exerted considerable influence on U.S. actions in Israel and the Middle East more broadly. AIPAC and other Jewish groups exert considerable influence on the political process financially via political action committees (PACs) that donate money to candidates (Medding 1992).

Evangelical Christian, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious lobbyist groups have been involved in politics primarily at the federal level. Like secular lobbyists, religious lobbyists aim to affect the political process by influencing the choice of issues that are up for congressional debate and mobilizing congressional and public opinion regarding those issues. Groups do this by publishing action alerts, newsletters, and magazines about their faith traditions and their work. The Council on American Islamic Relations, for example, publishes a quarterly newsletter, Faith in Action. Religious lobbyists also propose bills, testify before congressional committees, track legislation, provide information to Congress and the media on the effects of public policy, and mobilize their constituencies regarding relevant issues (Hertz 1988). With the exception of some Jewish groups, the majority do not contribute money to PACs (Fowler et al. 1998). At the judicial level, religious lobbyists have also sometimes led the groups they represent to file amicus curiae, or friend of the court, briefs in relevant federal and state court cases.

As with secular advocacy organizations, the results of religious advocacy efforts at the national level have been mixed (Hertz 1988; Hofrenning 1995). The Christian Coalition significantly influenced electoral politics in the 1980s, and more recently mainline Protestant groups influenced actions concerning debt relief for poor nations through the Jubilee 2000 campaign. More recently, grassroots religious organizations have played an important role in federal policies involving so-called religious freedom in other countries, that is, monitoring foreign governments' policies toward Christian missionaries and various indigenous religious groups. The relation between the tax status of religious groups and their involvement in public advocacy has, of course, been a recurrent issue, as in the Supreme Court case United States Catholic Conference et al. v. Abortion Rights Mobilization (1988), in which Abortion Rights Mobilization and others tried, unsuccessfully, to revoke the 501(c)(3) status of the Catholic Church because of what they perceived to be inconsistent enforcement across organizations of the rules governing the lobbying activities of 501(c)(3) organizations.

**TRANSNATIONAL ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS**

In addition to their domestic concerns, international issues are important to many religious and nonreligious nonprofit organizations in the United States. Since the late eighteenth century, American religious organizations have sent people and funds abroad to spread religious messages and to provide social services, engage in political advocacy, and offer technical assistance. Institutional and local communication between religious groups in the United States and abroad is also an important component of the transnationalization of religious practice. At the institutional level, many religious groups in the United States are in contact with related groups abroad. The Episcopal Church in the United States, for example, is in contact with Episcopal churches around the world in regular meetings of the Anglican Com-
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mission of Churches. Other religious groups, such as the Thai Buddhist temple Wat Mongkolpemeunee, outside Philadelphia, are closely affiliated with religious organizations centered outside the United States. On the local level, immigration, especially since 1965, has encouraged the flow of ideas and practices between religious organizations in sending and receiving countries. Catholic parishes in Boston and parts of the Dominican Republic, for example, are increasingly related as individuals move between parishes in each location and religious practices converge with their movements (Levitt 1998). Because they have the economic wherewithal, a growing number of middle-class Americans also participate annually in short-term trips to other countries as part of church-sponsored mission and relief programs (Peterson, Aeschliman, and Snead 2003). These programs are undoubtedly facilitated by the activities of international nongovernmental organizations, or INGOs (such as World Vision and Catholic Relief) and by the growing infrastructure of churches and humanitarian nonprofit organizations in developing countries (Jenkins 2002).

Nonprofit U.S.-based missions organizations have been involved in work abroad since the early nineteenth century. The Protestant American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was founded in 1810 as the first and, for the next fifty years, the largest agency to send workers abroad. Clergy members were sent abroad first, and laypeople later joined the missionary force (Hutchison 1987). By the end of World War I, Christian missionaries were spread around the globe (Miller 1998). In addition to their work of spreading the Gospel, they built and supported schools, hospitals, and agricultural extension programs in their countries of residence (Barridge 1991). The religious affiliations of missionaries abroad changed significantly in the twentieth century. The number of mainstream Protestant missions declined during the century while the number of Evangelical and Pentecostal missions increased dramatically, especially after 1960 (Hutchison 1987). Missionaries working with the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses also increased in number during the second half of the century. At present, evangelical and Pentecostal groups dominate the mission landscape, although Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian groups in the United States continue to place religious workers abroad. The Southern Baptist Convention International Missions Board, a nonprofit organization based in the United States, currently is the largest American presence overseas as measured both by the number of persons placed (more than 4,000) and by its financial resources ($22.1 million; Siewert and Valdez 1997). Whereas local congregations formerly participated in such activities via denominational mission boards, more congregations currently send mission teams abroad directly to help build local churches, train indigenous clergy members, or engage in relief efforts (ibid.). Churches that do not send their own members abroad may support a specific missionary or collect money for a mission’s organization.

The rise of evangelical Christianity in Latin America in the past 40 years is a vivid illustration of the involvement of U.S.-based religious organizations in missions there. Pentecostalism grew slowly in Latin America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of the efforts of European immigrants, American and British Bible societies, and missionaries from Protestant churches in the United States and Europe (Deirios 1991). As the religious right grew in the United States and political situations changed in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, evangelical and Pentecostal missions increased on the continent and gained large numbers of members, especially among the lower classes. By the 1980s, 10 percent of Latin Americans were evangelicals, with the percentage significantly higher in Brazil, Chile, and much of Central America (Stoll 1989; Garrard-Burnett and Stoll 1993). In Guatemala, for example, evangelicalism and Pentecostalism grew dramatically after the earthquake of 1976. Members of U.S. evangelical churches, relief and development organizations, and parachurch groups poured into the country to help with disaster relief, and many stayed or formed alliances with local groups before returning home. By the mid-1990s, 25 to 35 percent of Guatemalans were Protestant, and half of those were Pentecostal (Sherman 1997). Although most evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Latin America are currently led by Latin Americans, many remain strongly tied to North American organizations, most particularly to the Assemblies of God (Deirios 1991). North American organizations provide guidance, financial assistance, pastoral education, and televangelism to local churches, directly influencing Latin America’s rapidly changing religious landscape (D. Martin 1990, Levine and Stoll 1997).

In addition to their mission activities abroad, religious organizations in the United States have been involved with church-affiliated relief and development organizations around the world. Following World War II, religious groups established nonprofit organizations such as the United Methodist Committee on Relief (formed in 1940), Catholic Relief Services (formed in 1943), Lutheran World Relief (formed in 1945), and Church World Service (formed in 1945) to resettle displaced people and help rebuild war-torn Europe (Nichols 1988; B. Smith 1990). By the 1950s, Catholic Relief Services had become the largest private relief agency in the world (Nichols 1988). These groups have continued to provide services and have shifted their focus from Europe to the developing world and from short-term emergency relief services to long-term development strategies (B. Smith 1998). The impact of these organizations has been significant. The organization USAID provides money for services in the developing world, often relying on religious and church-affiliated organizations because of their track records and their impartial distribution of services (B. Smith 1982). In 1981, in part because of USAID’s support, church-affiliated nonprofits accounted for almost one-third of all nongovernmental overseas assistance that year ($1.4 billion of $4.5 billion; B. Smith 1998). In 1990, nearly 10 percent of Western nonprofits involved in work abroad were affiliated with a religious organization (ibid.). The activities of
these nonprofits appear to be remarkably similar regardless of the faith tradition with which they are involved. Mainline Protestant and evangelical groups, for example, run their own programs and support indigenous programs in about equal numbers and do not seem to have programs that are of different sizes or have different foci. The groups do justify their programs differently, however, with evangelicals emphasizing individual responsibility and mainline Protestants often focusing on community responsibility more broadly (Kniss and Campbell 1997).

Research suggests that religious groups working transnationally can be categorized in various ways, for instance, according to their level of organization in the sending and receiving countries (local, regional, national, international), their orientation (evangelical missions, economic development), their funding (public, private), and their staff (professional or volunteer). Although researchers have begun to consider these issues for INGOs in general, the significance of a religion’s founders and affiliations has not been adequately explored (Boli and Thomas 1997; Lindenberg and Dobel 1999). Research that specifically compares the ways religious and secular relief and development organizations do their work abroad will allow for a fuller understanding of the ways similarly structured religious and secular nonprofit organizations aim to create social change.

These examples illustrate some of the ways in which religion extends beyond the usual considerations raised in studies of local congregations and local communities. Nonprofit organizations that are affiliated with religious groups in the United States are centrally involved in the process of globalization. As transnational actors they have contributed and continue to contribute to globalization by spreading people, finances, and ideas around the world. In addition to instigating changes abroad, religious groups in the United States are being influenced on their own shores by the relatively recent growth of newly imported religious traditions. Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Sikh religious centers dot the nation, and the dialogue between these centers and their countries of origin is changing the American religious landscape (Wuthnow 2005). Future research that describes the ways transnational religious organizations relate to their constituencies around the globe will add to our understanding of the ways religious groups function as transnational actors.

RELIGION, GIVING, AND VOLUNTEERING

Any survey of the relation between religion and the nonprofit sector must include the ways in which religious involvement influences the availability of resources on which nonprofit organizations depend. Although third-party payments and payments by clients are important to much of the nonprofit sector, voluntary contributions of time and money also remain significant. In the past decade, researchers have focused considerable attention on the relation between the religious beliefs and practices of individuals, on one hand, and their philanthropic giving and volunteering, on the other. Several national surveys have been conducted, and these have been supplemented with qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations (Wuthnow 1991; Hoge et al. 1996). Much of the research has been concerned with questions of motivation and opportunity.

Nearly all religious traditions emphasize some form of altruism, whether expressed as love of neighbor, care for the poor, hospitality, or service to fellow members of one’s community. Several overlapping manifestations of altruistic values have been identified: humanitarianism, or the capacity to empathize with a needy person on grounds of sharing the basic fact of being members of the same species; the pursuit of happiness, or the belief that God wants all people to be happy and that individual happiness is optimized when others in one’s social context are also happy; reciprocity, or the view that resources and talents are divine gifts that are intended to be shared with those who have fewer gifts; and self-realization, or the idea that personal fulfillment is a divine expectation that can best be achieved by putting oneself in challenging situations such as helping others (Wuthnow 1995; Monroe 1996). Most Americans subscribe to one or more of these rationales for altruistic behavior. They may differ, of course, in how they define the target groups toward which altruism is shown and in practice may be more driven by self-interest than by altruistic ideals.

Religious organizations absorb a significant share of Americans’ altruistic behavior. By 2003, for example, financial giving to religious organizations had risen to more than $84 billion annually, and this figure accounted for more than half of all giving from private households (U.S. Statistical Abstract 2004). Most of this money is spent on clergy salaries and on the maintenance of buildings, but at least a small fraction goes toward wider community needs (Hoge et al. 1996; Wuthnow 2004). In the same period, volunteering for religious organizations was more common than for any other kind of organization (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1994). The religiously involved are more likely than the religiously uninvolved to volunteer for other nonprofit organizations and to do volunteer work informally (Wuthnow 1991; Greeley 1997). Surveys also show that religious involvement encourages people to think about their responsibility to the poor and to say they want more from life than a good job and a comfortable lifestyle—attitudes that are in turn related to participation in charitable activities (Wuthnow 1994b).

Religious organizations vary in the extent to which they provide opportunities and incentives for giving and volunteering and in the kinds of volunteer activities in which members participate. At least 75 percent of those who attend services participate in congregations that sponsor social service activities of one kind or another, meaning that most congregants have opportunities to volunteer (Chaves 1999, 2004). But larger congregations typically have more of these activities than do smaller ones; thus members of larger congregations are also more likely to be involved in more volunteer activities than are members of smaller ones (Wuthnow 2001, 2004). The most notable differences in kinds of volunteering are those between evangelical Protestants and mainline Protestants: church involvement among the former
is associated mainly with volunteering within the congregation, among the latter, with joining and volunteering for a wider variety of community organizations (Wuthnow 1999). Similar differences are evident in giving patterns (Iannaccone 1998; Hoge et al. 1996; Hamilton and Ichnach 1995).

The content of sermons, discussions, and other group activities also influences parishioners’ likelihood of engaging in giving and volunteering. In one study, church members who were involved in charitable activities were more likely than members not involved in charitable activities to have heard a stewardship sermon in the past year and participated in a small fellowship group (Wuthnow 1994b). In another study, members of small prayer and Bible study groups that discussed forgiveness were more likely than members of groups that did not discuss forgiveness to say they had worked to heal broken relationships and had engaged in volunteer activities at their church and in other community organizations (Wuthnow 2000a). Further research would be necessary, however, to establish causal relationships. Research concerning pastors shows that sermons about charitable (especially financial) giving are often preached reluctantly and in ways that may obscure their effectiveness (Wuthnow 1997). Pastors say they have not been trained well to preach about giving and sometimes report worrying that members will respond negatively if preaching focuses too much on giving.

Less research has been done on the recipients of altruistic behavior than on givers and volunteers, but in one national survey of working Americans 4 percent claimed to have received financial help from a religious organization within the past year. Eighty percent of these recipients were themselves church or synagogue members (compared to 56 percent of nonrecipients), and 61 percent belonged to religious fellowship groups (compared to 18 percent among nonrecipients). The recipients were disproportionately people in lower income brackets who had children and who had been laid off from their jobs or experienced pay cuts and had trouble paying their bills; nearly half had received religious counseling as well as financial assistance (Wuthnow 1994b). Further research would be needed to determine the extent to which religious networks provide an informal safety net that prevents people from having to seek formal assistance from government or nonprofit service agencies.

Qualitative research is also beginning to challenge the assumption that religion’s role in promoting volunteering is always and necessarily beneficial. For instance, Lichterman (2003) shows that religious groups that encourage caring for needy individuals in their community often have difficulty understanding the collective character and identity of other groups as groups, especially when those groups differ in racial, ethnic, and religious composition. Questions also remain about the extent to which religious volunteering may encourage or discourage understanding of social justice.

Until relatively recently, research concerning religion and research about the nonprofit sector were conducted largely in isolation from one another. Only in the past few years has the extensive role of religion in the nonprofit sector begun to be appreciated within the academic community. As a result, many conceptual and empirical issues remain. For instance, quantitative and qualitative studies of congregations have flourished in recent years, greatly increasing our knowledge of the size, worship styles, and social ministries of congregations. Yet, in comparison, relatively little is known about other faith-based nonprofit organizations or the roles they play in relation to congregations. In the absence of more detailed research, the two general conclusions that emerge about the management of faith-based nonprofits are, first, that the challenges facing these organizations are in many ways similar to those facing other nonprofits, and, second, that religion poses several unique challenges for the nonprofit sector. The common challenges arise from competition within the nonprofit sector and between it and the for-profit sector for scarce resources. Because nonprofit organizations have generally been regarded as a positive feature of democratic societies and because religion appears to reinforce involvement in nonprofits, researchers have also tended to pay more attention to the positive contributions of religion than to its negative aspects.

Several specific challenges face the leaders of faith-based nonprofit organizations. These include developing and maintaining viable linkages between local, regional or state, and national organizations—linkages that may at one time have been less important to religious organizations or supplied by denominational structures. These linkages are likely to include and depend on strong relationships with federal, state, and local government agencies from which funding is received. Although many policy makers believe faith-based organizations can play a significant role in social service provision, few think that these organizations can effectively replace government programs (McCarthy and Castelli 1996; Cnaan 2002). At the local level, overcoming the spatial mismatch between the more affluent communities in which the majority of U.S. congregations are located and the more needy communities in which social services are lacking is an important challenge (Ramsay 1998). The organization and management of volunteers also becomes increasingly important, especially as volunteering becomes more sporadic, short-term, and specialized. Religious values may continue to encourage altruism, but the effective mobilization of altruism requires thoughtful planning and management.

Religious freedom entails protection for the expression of minority religious views, especially from infringement that may arise intentionally or inadvertently from government action or from the actions of religious organizations themselves. Insofar as government relies on religious organizations to carry out such social functions as education, treatment of the sick, and care of the poor, the rights and privileges of minority religious groups must be given special consideration (Wolfe 2003). The strength of religion in America has depended on the competition that prevails under a system of religious freedom, yet the considerable resources that religion has garnered as a result of this sys-
ter make religion a logical ally in such wide-ranging social causes as education, healthcare reform, overcoming racial discrimination, and protecting the environment. At the same time, religious freedom—not to mention individuals and groups that are violating the law—permits darker aspects of the human spirit to flourish, as evidenced in clergy pedophilia, religiously motivated hate crimes and violence, and the misuse of religious funds (Juergensmeyer 2001). Religious freedom also encourages a kind of privatized expression of faith that leads to withdrawal from active participation in religious organizations in favor of more personalized forms of spirituality. Privatization of this kind reduces engagement with the voluntary organizations that are so much a part of the nonprofit sector.

NOTES

1. 98 U.S. 145 (1879).
2. 175 U.S. 291 (1899).
3. This section draws heavily on Witte (2000).
4. 310 U.S. 296 (1940).
17. See also Schlesinger and Gray (this volume) for further discussion of empirical studies in health.
18. See also http://www.religioustolerance.org/.

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