RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN AMERICA

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SOCIAL TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Committee on Social Indicators
Social Science Research Council

Foreword

For much of the first half of this century, American social science was actively engaged in overcoming what Walter Lippmann in 1922 identified as "the central difficulty of self-government" in the modern world, namely, the difficulty of creating a public competent to confront complexity and change without retreating into political passivity. Quantitative social scientists set out to devise ways of tracking and analyzing change that would make it comprehensible to the public. Social "reporting," as originally conceived, was integral to the underlying political purpose of social science: the accommodation of a plurality of interests in the context of expanding popular expectations.

The classic monument to this commitment was the two-volume *Recent Social Trends,* prepared by the President's Research Committee on Recent Social Trends and published in 1933. The blending of science and public information characteristic of the day is expressed in the summary of the committee's findings: "in the formulation of . . . new and emergent values, in the construction of the new symbols to thrill men's souls, in the contrivance of the new institutions and adaptations useful in the fulfillment of new aspirations, we trust that this review of recent social trends may prove of value to the American public."

Optimism about the role of empirical social science continued into the era of the Great Depression, although it came to emphasize the problems introduced by change rather than progressive improvements. This work nonetheless reflected engaged, hopeful concern, as did the contributions of American social scientists to the war effort that followed. When social science

emerged from World War II, however, its characteristic posture was far more ironic than formerly, less confident in the meaning of its indicators, more hermetic, more specialized. The task of systematic description and analysis of recent social change fell further away from the ordinary activities of academic social scientists.

As editors of the series Social Trends in the United States, we contend that social science has a collective responsibility to report findings about society to the public, in order to contribute to the informed choices that are necessary in a democracy. If the reports of social scientists are to be useful to citizens, their authors must define questions for educational and political relevance and must translate technical terminology into the language of common discourse. Modern statistical methods make it possible to trace change along a large number of dimensions in which the pattern of change over time is rarely visible to people directly involved in it, and to discern how change in one dimension may affect change in others. Such information, in compact and comprehensible form, can make a useful contribution to political discussion.

This is the rationale of the series, which is sponsored by the Committee on Social Indicators of the Social Science Research Council. The committee invites authoritative scholars to contribute manuscripts on particular topics and has other scholars review each manuscript with attention to both the scientific and the broadly educational purposes of the series. Nevertheless, the volumes in the series are the authors' own, and thus far from uniform. Each is free-standing, but we hope that the effect of the series will be cumulative. Taken together, these volumes will not constitute an overall contemporary history: historical accounts evoke context rather than extract single dimensions of change. The series, however, will provide insights into interconnected aspects of contemporary society that no contemporary history—and no one interested in understanding our present condition—should ignore.

James A. Davis and John Modell

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Religion has been with the human species at least since the time of early Neanderthal cave burials in what we now call the Middle East. It is, as someone has said, at minimum the modest doctrine that God is not mad.

Religion reassures humankind in both its moments of agony (seemingly without end) and its moments of ecstasy (all too brief) that there is some purpose in life beyond life itself, that the universe is something more than a concatenation of chance phenomena, that death does not have the final word to say about human life.

As best we know the history of the species, most humans have been religious: they have at least paid lip service to whatever deities have been assumed to preside over their universe and have listened with some willingness to believe to the stories of how those deities deal with humans, stories which are templates for interpreting and directing one's life.

Nonetheless, only a few humans in any of the eras about which we know much have been intensely devout during their whole lives. The gods and their rituals and their stories were available for special occasions. Other meaning systems directed daily life much of the time. If religion is the modest doctrine that God is not mad, religious devotion has been the modest attempt on the part of humans to hedge their bet against the apparent truth of that doctrine.

Dissent from the accepted faiths has perhaps not been so rare,

although public dissent (à la Socrates) is rarely recorded. Until the Enlightenment, no one argued that humans did not need religion, much less that religion itself would wither away with the increase of scientific knowledge and the development of education. Since then, the conflict between science and religion has seemed inevitably destined to produce a victory for science. If scientific knowledge is the only valid form of human knowledge, then religion, which can make no claim to scientific method, can survive only as long as ignorance and superstition prevent humans from understanding science.

Moreover as technology, the offspring of science, gives humans more control over their world, the need to regard the world with religious awe will disappear. It is, as the German scripture scholar Rudolph Bultmann remarked, difficult to believe in the mystery of lightning when one can control electricity with the flick of a light switch.

Much social scientific work on religion starts with the assumption that humans are not as religious as they used to be and that any indicator of religious attitude or behavior ought therefore to show a decline in the importance of religion (although American scholars of the sociology of religion have generally in recent years come to question that assumption).

This book is a modest attempt to ask how well religion has in fact fared in the United States since 1940, when survey research began to ask questions about American religious attitudes and behavior.

We would think on first consideration of such questions that religion in America must have changed enormously since the time when the Great Depression was yielding to the Second World War. In 1940 most Americans did not own automobiles. Airplane travel was the privilege of the very few. Only a few suburbs clustered around the great cities. A substantial proportion of the population still lived on farms. Television was still an experimental phenomenon. Birthrates had fallen during the Great Depression, divorce rates were still very low, and, outside certain

elite groups, divorce was viewed as a disgrace. There were only half as many Americans as there are today, and one dollar could buy goods and services which require almost eight dollars today. The income of Americans in constant dollars (adjusted for inflation) was only one-quarter what it is in the 1980s.

How can a society, it might well be asked, endure such changes in the space of little less than half a century and not have its religious beliefs and behaviors shaken to their foundations? Surely Americans are not as religious as they were in the small towns and urban neighborhoods of the late 1930s—are they? American religion must have changed, it will be argued; the only question is of what sort the change might be.

Three incidents out of many exemplify this attitude. In the autumn of 1984 a weekly newsmagazine reported that, despite the influence of the Moral Majority, religion was on the wane in the United States: the most recent Gallup poll on church attendance showed that it was not increasing at as rapid a rate as it had in previous years. That winter, the anchorman on a national evening newscast informed viewers that the just-published *Statistical Abstract of the United States* showed that Americans were not attending church services as much as they had in the past. Finally, when the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) invited me to prepare this book, its letter assumed that one of the major tasks of a study of religious indicators over the past half-century would be to document the "secularization" of the American population—the decline, in other words, of religious commitment in American life.

There are two sorts of vested interests in the alleged decline of religion. Those who themselves are not religious—frequently having broken with the religious affiliations and practices of their childhood—find, in what seems to them to be the decline of religious commitment and devotion, proof that their own decision was the correct one, a mere anticipation of where everyone else is headed. On the other hand are those religious leaders who use the alleged decline of faith as a tool to cajole their followers to

return, after suitable penance and conversion, to a golden age of piety and devotion. Both groups would even agree on the reasons for the decline of religion—secularism, materialism, science, the lure of hedonism, the restlessness of youth. The difference between the unbeliever and the leader of believers is that the former sees the process of decline as irreversible, whereas the latter thinks that the decline can be turned around, though with difficulty, by a revival of religious fervor—either, if the leader is of the liberal persuasion, by dedication to "justice and peace" or, if the leader is of a conservative or fundamentalist persuasion, by dedication to the traditional principles and practices of the religious heritage.

As will be seen in the following chapters, none of the models of religious decline implicit in the three anecdotes above satisfactorily fits the data that are available to those who study American religion empirically. The reason for presenting these models in narrative form at the outset is to illustrate the powerful assumptions about religion which exist in elite segments of American society. Those who challenge such assumptions must exercise considerable rigor in their data analysis and presentation if they expect to obtain a hearing.

Religion, in other words, like politics, taxes, sex, and word-processing programs, is a topic about which there are strong feelings, predispositions, convictions. Any attempt to pull together the available data about religious attitudes and behaviors for the last half-century must therefore be based both on rigorous assumptions and on clearly defined limits. I am not essaying here a study of American religion but merely, and much more modestly, a report on the changes in American religion in the years since national surveys began; and, rather than attempting to tell the "whole story" of American religion since the Great Depression, I am limiting myself, by assignment and training, to the part of the story which can be gleaned from survey data. Moreover, I begin with the fundamental assumption that it is better to use data about which there are the fewest possible doubts, at the cost

of a more schematic story, than to use more dubious data to tell a richer and more interesting story. I therefore hold myself to three rules:

1. I use only indicators that are represented by questions asked over time. If a question was asked in a survey only in the last five years, for example, I resist the temptation of the good-old-days fallacy (or bad old days, depending upon one's perspective) to suggest that, "Well, we all know that such a striking attitude or behavior didn't exist forty years ago." I am prepared to make judgments about what happened forty years ago only if I have the same indicator from a survey then. Other evidence about, say, the frequency of intense religious experience in the 1940s may be useful and interesting in a historical monograph about religious experience, but it has no place in a social indicators report.

2. I insist that the wording of the question be the same throughout the period in which it was used. A modified indicator is a new indicator—unless there is a link which connects the two (no such links exist, as far as I am aware, in religious indicators).

3. Finally, I use only data from "multistage" or "strict probability" national samples, in which each unit in the population has an equal chance of being chosen. As useful as studies of the San Francisco Bay area or the Detroit area may be, they are not national studies. They provide excellent information on those two interesting areas of the country—which have the good fortune of being adjacent to universities with survey research competence—but neither the Bay nor Detroit is America. One cannot and should not generalize from changes which may or may not have occurred in these locales to the rest of the country—not, at any rate, in a study of national social indicators.

At the end, therefore, I will be content to say, "This is at least what we know about American religion since 1940, and know with considerable confidence from the survey data."

In general, there are five models to be tested against the survey data available to us:

1. *The secularization model.* In this perspective, perhaps the most common among social scientists, it is assumed that religion is—perhaps necessarily and self-evidently—on the wane in the Western urbanized, industrialized nations. Perhaps there are occasional "blips" in the trajectories, but science, technology, universal education and the demystification or—to use the theologian's term—"demythologization" of the cosmos represent separately and together forces of irreligion which the traditional faiths cannot endure over the long run. Science will inevitably win its long-standing conflict with religion.

2. *The cyclic model.* Other observers note that religion in the United States seems to persist doggedly long after it ought to have disappeared. To them there seem to be ebbs and flows in religion, great cyclic movements of rise and fall, of secularization and, to use a word of which Peter Berger is fond, "resacralization." Perhaps the long-term trajectories are still down, but religion has remarkable residual power to reassert its hold on human beings, particularly in conservative political times. Those who embrace this model might argue that in the period 1940–1985 there were swings of the giant pendulum in favor of religion in the 1950s and the 1980s—times of patriotism and conservative Republican presidencies—the decades of Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan.

3. *The episodic event model.* In this perspective, religious changes may be the result of "one-shot" events which have an impact but are not repeated. Thus some observers of the American family contend that the increase in divorces in the 1970s and the subsequent end of this increase were the result of a " trauma" to the existing system caused by the invention of the birth control pill, the greater control it gave women over their own fertility, and the resultant greater freedom to pursue economic independence through entry into the work force. Once this change had been "absorbed," these observers suggest, the trajectory of family dissolution rates leveled off. During the years under consideration in this book, the Second Vatican Council mandated substantial

changes in the Catholic church. This could be an episodic event which had considerable impact on the religious behavior of American Catholics. Whether that impact was in fact long-term or episodic remains to be tested against the data.

4. *The stability model.* While change is news, the absence of change is not. Yet many aspects of the human condition do not change—conflict between faculty and administration, eventual marriage of most humans, intergenerational conflict. Because of its profound importance as the "ultimate symbol system," the system of answers to the most fundamental questions of meaning about which the human person can wonder, religion is one of those relatively immutable dimensions of human behavior which will not change much over time, at least not in the short run (say, two decades) or the medium run (a half-century, more or less).

5. *The religious growth model.* Although no one that I know of has seriously proposed that there is a propensity for humankind to grow more religious (perhaps in the face of the seemingly permanent threat of nuclear annihilation), for reasons of logic it should be considered as a possibility to be tested. The trajectories might well be headed up instead of down.

The first two models have the greatest appeal because of their symmetry and elegance. Great sweeping movements which can be used to order and explain much that puzzles us in the human condition are more attractive than episodic accidents or the monotony of a phenomenon that changes very little, if at all. Yet elegance and symmetry, as useful as they are for preliminary consideration of phenomena, are not finally decisive. The question to which a serious analysis must address itself is whether, in addition to being elegant, a model also fits the data.

There is nothing inherently contradictory about the five models presented above. They all might be true of different parts of the elephant of American religious behavior. And indeed, it is possible that at the end of this investigation, we might be reduced to observing, in effect, that some indicators are going up, some

are going down, some are remaining stable, some have been jolted by various one-shot traumas, and some seem subject to periodic cycles that are not unlike the business cycles—unquestionable, but mostly inexplicable.

In fact there are some data which fit each of the five models. Certainly the stability model, with some minor modifications to improve the goodness of fit, cannot be rejected: the indicators show much more stability than change in American religion. Religion may be in decline in the United States, but that decline cannot be proved from the available social indicator data.

The ordinary strategy of social research is to seek differences and then to attempt to explain the differences. In this book the differences to be sought are changes over time in religious behavior. Where there are no changes, there are no differences to explain. Stability, then, needs no explanation, but change does. One result of this strategy is that there is more analysis of Catholics in the following chapters than of Protestants, because most of the observable changes in religious indicators are limited to the Catholic population. Protestants' religious attitudes and behavior have not changed greatly in the last half century. Catholics' religious attitudes and behavior have, as has their social and economic condition. However, the former does not seem to be the result of the latter.

There are several special difficulties in the study of religious social indicators.

1. There simply are not as many indicators of religion as there are of race or family life. Accordingly, an analysis of American religion must necessarily be less elaborate than one of American racial or familial or occupational attitudes and behavior. Given only a handful of religious items that go back to the beginning of surveys (one as far back as 1939), we are constrained to paint a very sketchy picture of American religion before the 1960s.

2. Although all three major sources of our data—the Gallup organization (AIPO; American Institute of Public Opinion), the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan (SRC), and

NORC (formerly the National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago—provide high-quality data, intensive analysis of the relationship between religion and other variables became practical only with the institution of the annual NORC General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS has been administered every year but two since 1972 to some 1,500 respondents. Some questions are asked every year, some every other year, some every three years. Thus the number of cases for most questions in the survey runs from 7,000 to more than 20,000. As a result we can speak with greater confidence of American religion from the early 1970s to the present than we can of previous years. In order to provide enough cases for statistical confidence, in the following chapters I will often cluster the twelve General Social Surveys into three groups: "early 1970s" (1972–1975), "late 1970s" (1976–1980), and "early 1980s" (1982–1985 or –1986). (There was no GSS in 1979 and 1981.) (One of the most important early studies of American religion was done in 1952 for the *Catholic Digest* by Ben Gaffin Associates. Unfortunately, the data cards from that study have been lost; thus it is impossible to analyze any change from that base point to subsequent research.)

3. The limited size of national samples makes it virtually impossible to discuss change in smaller denominations. "What about Mormons?" or "What about the Unitarians?" are the sorts of questions I am frequently asked after lectures on these subjects. I have to reply that there are not enough respondents in the ordinary survey to talk confidently even about Jews, much less about smaller groups. Since Jews make up approximately 3 percent of the American population, a typical survey of 1,500 respondents will include only between 40 and 50 whose denominational affiliation is Jewish. Even combining five years of GSSs will provide only a few more than 200 Jewish respondents. No responsible scholar would attempt serious analysis of religious behavior with such inadequate numbers. In fact, with the data resources now available, we can confidently address only two broad categories: "Protestant" and "Catholic." Within the