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# Religious Transformation since 1945: Is There an American Religious Exceptionalism?

Mark Edward Ruff

Discussions of religion transformations in the United States since 1945 often boil down to a collision between two sets of concepts deeply rooted in politics, ideology and civic tradition – theories of secularization and the belief in an American exceptionalism or uniqueness. This might seem to be a vast oversimplification in light of the often nebulous nature of both sets of concepts. Theories of secularization – in all of their sundry iterations – remain some of the most intensely debated, ideologically charged and bitterly contested concepts used to explain religious decline in many parts of the Western world.<sup>1</sup> The notion of an American exceptionalism, though one of the oldest motifs in American civic culture, is also a concept that has meant different things to different people and groups at various points in the history of the United States.<sup>2</sup> It has its origins in the vision of

<sup>1</sup> The literature on secularization, one of the most contested theories in the field of religion, is too enormous to be summarized here. For overviews of the debates, see Steve Bruce (Ed.), *Religion and modernization: sociologists and historians debate the Secularization Thesis*, Oxford 1992.

<sup>2</sup> For overviews of the concepts of American exceptionalism, see James W. Ceaser, *The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism*, in: *American Political Thought*, 1 (2012), 3–28; Patrick J. Deneen, *Cities of Man on a Hill*, in: *American Political Thought*, 1 (2012), 29–52; Peter Onuf, *American Exceptionalism and National Identity*, in: *American Political Thought*, 1 (2012), 77–100; Justin B. Litke, *Varieties of American Exceptionalism: Why John Winthrop is no Imperialist*, in: *Journal of Church and State*, 54 (2012), 197–213; Daniel T. Rodgers, *American Exceptionalism Revisited*, in: *Raritan*, 24 (2005), 21–47; Michael Adas, *From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History*, in: *The American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 1692–1720; Michael Kammen, *The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration*, in: *American Quarterly*, 45 (1993), 1–43; Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, New Haven 2009; Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, New York 1996; Byron E. Shafer, *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, Oxford 1991; Elizabeth Glaser/Hermann Wellenreuther, *Bridging the Atlantic: The Question of American Exceptionalism in Perspective*, Washington 2002.

the Puritans of a shining city on a hill and the distinct mission endowed by providence upon the new colonies and nation. But it has also been used to refer to societal and cultural differences that appear to make the United States distinct from Western Europe, in particular. The United States, it is commonly pointed out, has had less aristocracy, less socialism, more guns, more violence, more patriotism in its civic culture – and more faith. This was an observation made by various commentators on the American landscape already in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the great political theorist, Alexis de Tocqueville and the German sociologist, Werner Sombart.<sup>3</sup> But it is also one that functions as a dividing line in American politics today – with conservatives perceived as seeking to uphold the notion of an American exceptionalism and liberals perceived as seeking to deny it or hoping to make the United States more like Western Europe.<sup>4</sup>

And more critically, these observations continue to inform, sometimes overtly, more frequently unwittingly, discussions of religious change that center over the question of whether the United States has or is following the religious path of Western Europe.<sup>5</sup> Are Americans, like the overwhelming majority of their cousins in Western Europe, beginning to distance themselves from religious institutions? For those critical of secularization theories, it has become an article of faith that the vitality in the religious landscape of the United States rebuts claims that social and economic modernization inevitably leads to religious decline.<sup>6</sup> Such observers of the American religious landscape invariably point to what seems to have been an explosive growth in evangelical churches not just in traditionally conservative regions like the South and Interior West but in the far West and Midwest. They note the presence of flourishing immigrant churches across the nation. They hone in on the fact that the United States' political discourse remains explicitly religious and that politicians of all political stripes evoke a

<sup>3</sup> These two classic works from 1835/1840 and 1906 are: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chicago 2000; Werner Sombart, *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?*, Tübingen 1906.

<sup>4</sup> The term «American exceptionalism» became enmeshed in American presidential politics, when President Barack Obama was specifically asked whether he subscribed to this concept during a press conference held in Strasbourg on April 4, 2009. For the transcript of this press conference, see <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=85959>> (1 July 2013). For an overview of how conservative took exception to Obama's response to the question about American exceptionalism, see Jason A. Edwards, *Contemporary Conservative Constructions of American Exceptionalism*, in: *Contemporary Rhetoric*, 1 (2011), 40–54.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, it is religious conservatives, who are most likely to embrace concepts of American exceptionalism, who are most likely to point to forces of secularization sweeping across the country; similarly, it is political liberals, those likely to be most critical of concepts of American exceptionalism, who are most quick to point to the continued vitality of American religion as it provides a facile explanation for Republican electoral strength in key regions like the south and rural regions outside of the Northeast. There are, of course, many commentators and analysis who serve as exceptions to this pattern.

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Berger/Grace Davie/Effie Fokas (Ed.), *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations*, Aldershot 2008; Peter Berger (Ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids 1999.

Christian discourse of God and the Judeo-Christian heritage alleged to be at the heart of the nation's founding. They point out that Americans believe, belong and behave more religiously than almost any other developed nation.<sup>7</sup> For adherents of so-called «rational-choice» theories of religious behavior, the United States provides the consummate example of a thriving religious marketplace in which the competition between denominations and parishes for members ensure that spiritual products were of a higher quality than those in the stagnant religious monocultures of continental Europe.<sup>8</sup> Or in the words of the rational choice theorist, Jeffrey K. Hadden, laws of economics undergird this religious marketplace: «Religious economies consist of firms, products, consumers, market share and penetration, competition, regulated and unregulated economies, monopolies, and so on. Anchored in rational choice, participation in religion is a voluntary activity. Religious organizations compete for members, albeit under different conditions in different cultures and historical periods.»<sup>9</sup>

All of this would seem to be indicative of what might be called an «American religious exceptionalism», under which American religious institutions did not follow the path of decline found in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.<sup>10</sup> But as a scattering of sociologists, historians and above all, first-hand observers of American parish life have long been pointing out, there are significant flaws in this notion of an American religious exceptionalism.<sup>11</sup> For the postwar

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Putnam/David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York 2010, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Rodney Stark/Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Berkeley 2000; R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*, New York 1994, Roger Finke/Avery M. Guest/Rodney Stark, *Mobilizing Local Religious Markets*, in: *American Sociological Review*, 61 (1996), 203–218; Roger Finke/Laurence R. Iannaccone, *Supply-Wide Explanations for Religious Change*, in: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 527 (1993), 27–39; Laurence R. Iannaccone, *Introduction to the Economies of Religion*, in: *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36 (1998), 1465–1495; R. Stephen Warner, *Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States*, in: *American Journal of Sociology*, 98 (1993), 1044–93; Benjamin Ziemann, *Sozialgeschichte der Religion*, Frankfurt 2009, 88–91, and in particular, 91. Peter Berger, *Grace Davie and Effie Fokas buy into certain elements of this paradigm, albeit with much greater reserve and subtlety*. See Berger/Davie/Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?* (see note 6), 13–14, 34–36.

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Stark/William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, New Brunswick 1987, forward.

<sup>10</sup> For a critical examination of this concept, Edward A. Tiryakian, *American Religious Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration*, in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 527 (1993), 40–54. For another critical analysis, see N. J. Demereth III, *Excepting Exceptionalism: American Religion in Comparative Relief* in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 558 (1998), 28–39.

<sup>11</sup> For some of the most vocal criticisms of rational paradigms, see Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Oxford 2002, 204–228; Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*, New York 1996, 129–168; Pippa Norris/Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, New York 2004. For an excellent overview of these debates, see Lawrence Young (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion*, New York 1997.



era, it presents a far too undifferentiated picture. All too often, it assumes that the apparent dynamism within the world of American evangelicalism is representative and paradigmatic of the larger transformations taking place within mainstream denominations within the United States. This claim of an American religious exceptionalism skirts over regional differences, ignoring obvious differences not only between the South, Midwest, Northeast and West but within individual metropolitan areas. It downplays the fact that different generations have exhibited markedly divergent patterns of religious behavior and belief since 1945. It fails to account for fundamental changes in relationships between the state and religious institutions at both the local and national level. And not least, it papers over the fact that the survey data used to capture religious sentiment and practice is flawed on many levels.

Nonetheless, it has not been until the last several years that the chinks in this argument have finally made a dent in mainstream political and sociological discourse on this topic. This belated awareness of flaws in this model of religious exceptionalism has primarily come in response to recent demographic and political changes. Surveys of the American religious landscape have shown accelerated rates of declines in church attendance, increased rises in the numbers of young Americans in particular labeling themselves as atheists, agnostics or non-believers and a clear political shift towards the Democratic Party by those distancing themselves from religious institutions seen as too wedded to the Republican Party.<sup>12</sup> In the elections of November, 2012, some outspoken evangelical political candidates like the Missouri Senate candidate, Todd Akin, or those like Mitt Romney who were overwhelmingly supported by white evangelicals, were handed decisive political defeats. While it would be utterly foolhardy to write the obituary for conservative evangelical political activism, the elections do shed light on what is an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic religious landscape, one with as many similarities to Western Europe as differences, depending on region, generation, ethnicity, denomination and social class.

Because of obvious constraints of space, this article will not present a comprehensive or chronological picture of American religion since 1945.<sup>13</sup> It will instead examine these arguments sketched out above critical of the assumption that the United States has followed a religious trajectory fundamentally different than

<sup>12</sup> For the most dramatic statement of this, see the recent survey, «Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults have no Religious Affiliation», by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. <[http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf)> (19 Nov. 2012).

<sup>13</sup> For overviews, see Patrick Alitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History*, New York 2005; Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From their Origins to the 21st Century*, Champaign 2008. For an excellent overview of the 1960s and 1970s and a fuller bibliography than can be provided in this article, see Hugh McLeod, *The 1960s and 1970s as a Period of Basic Change*, in: Katharina Kunter/Jens Holger Schjørring (Ed.), *Europäisches und Globales Christentum: Herausforderungen und Transformationen im 20. Jahrhundert/European and Global Christianity* Göttingen 2011, 42–61.

that of continental Europe in the postwar era. It will, first, question whether there is an optimal religious marketplace in the United States, looking at patterns of settlement and migration. It will, second, look at generational changes; third, it will look at the role played by social class in religious transformation, and fourth, look at the role played by the welfare system. Fifth, it will question statistics on worship attendance, prayer and the number of evangelicals. Ultimately, it will challenge what has all too long been an overly rosy picture of American religious vitality for the postwar era and replace it with a more nuanced and complex representation of the religious transformations that have taken place.

*A competitive religious marketplace? Patterns of settlement*

At first glance, rational choice theory would seem to provide a logically compelling framework for understanding the apparent vitality of American religion for it is centered around an indisputable reality of American life: religious pluralism. From the time of its founding, the United States has been home to a plethora of denominations, sects and churches. It lacked a state church and with it legal means to ensure and enforce religious conformity. Yet rational choice theories conflate the reality of diversity with the existence of a competitive religious marketplace. For the first two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Americans were extremely loath to switch churches, let alone faiths. As late as the 1950s, only four percent of American adults had left the faith of their childhood. Cultural expectations obviously shaped this pattern.<sup>14</sup> Religion remained something that one was born into and kept for life. Cultural, ethnic and religious prejudices ensured that few Protestants would convert to Roman Catholicism, Mormonism or Judaism – and vice-versa. Immigrant children were expected to marry partners who shared their ethnicity, and of course, their faiths. But there were demographic factors underlying this pattern. In most localities and regions, one or two denominations exerted de facto religious monopolies.<sup>15</sup> In the South, Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists and Pentecostals held sway. In the Northeast, Roman Catholics, Congregationalists and Episcopalians predominated. In the rural Midwest, Lutheran and Roman Catholic villages often alternated like a checkerboard, though some regions were more distinctly more Lutheran or Roman Catholic like the Roman Catholic heartland surrounding St. Cloud, Minnesota. The Pacific Northwest was home to the largest percentages of the unchurched. Only the urban Midwest was more broadly representative of the nation's larger religious diversity.

That one or two denominations could disproportionately dominate religious life stemmed not only from the fact that individual religious groups in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries disproportionately settled in certain English colonies. It also resulted from patterns of immigration, in which certain ethnicities were particu-

<sup>14</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Princeton 1988, 88.

<sup>15</sup> See E.S. Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*, New York 1962.

larly drawn to certain regions. Roman Catholic Poles went disproportionately to cities like Buffalo, Milwaukee or Chicago, French Canadians to northern and central New England, Jews to New York City, Scandinavian Lutherans to Minnesota, North Dakota and Iowa. Religious revivals such as the Great Awakening of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or the Second Great Awakening of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had added to religious diversity and helped shape American evangelical impulses.<sup>16</sup> But they were located in the too distant past to shake-up the religious landscape in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though there were no official state churches in the United States, the religious situation more closely resembled that of Germany or the Netherlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, since Roman Catholics and Protestants rarely jumped ship to rival denominations, except in cases of intermarriage.

Defenders of rational choice theories would argue that the American religious landscape has become more competitive since the 1950s. By the 1980s, nearly one third of Americans had switched denominations. By 2008, nearly half percent of white Americans had left the faith they were raised in to join another denomination or religion – or to declare that they belonged to none at all.<sup>17</sup> If that figure includes Protestants who left for other Protestant denominations, such as Methodists who became evangelicals, that figure rises to 44 percent of adults.<sup>18</sup> Some of the largest percentage of switchers came from those raised Roman Catholic. Of the approximately one-third of Americans were raised Catholic, less than one quarter still call themselves Catholics.<sup>19</sup> The Roman Catholic church has maintained its high numbers only because of immigration from Mexico, Central America, the Philippines and Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> To no small degree, increased ethnic and racial intermarriage as well as the dissolution of received ethnic identities has facilitated such denominational switching.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the growth of «new religions», «natural religion» and new spiritual movements unaffiliated with any denomination in the 1960s and 1970s may also have helped loosen established denominational affiliations, especially among younger Americans.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For overviews of these movements, see Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity on Colonial America*, New Haven 2007; Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, New York 2005; Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, New Haven 1991. For a classic account, see William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607–1977*, Chicago 1978. Tellingly, McLoughlin saw the 1960s as a period of revival.

<sup>17</sup> Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 159–160.

<sup>18</sup> See the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey from 2008. <<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>; 5 Mar. 2013>.

<sup>19</sup> <<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>; 5 Mar. 2013>.

<sup>20</sup> Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 296–307.

<sup>21</sup> Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 142–143.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern*, New Brunswick/New Jersey 1994, 331–336.

*A competitive religious marketplace? Mass migrations*

But even here, the picture is not that of an optimal religious marketplace, in which Americans enjoyed the luxury of gravitating towards those churches with the best music, pastoral care, child-care facilities, theological traditions and spiritual sustenance. Switching denominations was often necessitated by constraints in the supply of churches available in the fastest growing regions of the United States. The last three decades witnessed mass migrations between regions of the country as well as within metropolitan areas themselves. By the 2000s, more than half of Americans were living in suburbs.<sup>23</sup> Outmigration from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West were facilitated by the spread of air conditioning and booming economies in the Sunbelt; movements from the inner cities and inner-ring suburbs to new far-flung suburbs commonly known as exurbs was expedited by housing booms and cheap land purchased from farmers. In some formerly sparsely populated rural regions of the South, West and Northeastern and Midwestern exurbs, newcomers entered regions with little religious diversity and few churches. Especially for Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants from the Northeast and Midwest, the odds were great that the denominations in which they had been raised would not be represented on their new turf. The options were to join existing churches or plant new ones.

The outcome was often foreordained. While older denominations did build new churches, many mainstream denominations and above all, the Roman Catholic church in particular, proved unable to build enough new churches in these swiftly growing regions. Newcomers seeking an active religious life in a parish, as a result, could only join that which was at hand, which in these formerly rural regions often meant conservative churches that were often evangelical or Baptist. In California, moreover, many migrants arriving between the 1930s through the 1970s were southern evangelicals.<sup>24</sup> In some case, they were able to replant their distinctive religious traditions on the soil of the American west even before newcomers from the Northeast and upper Midwest arrived. In such cases, denominational switching arose out of necessity – and not out of the pressures of a competitive religious marketplace. Why did mainstream Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic church not make new church construction in booming regions a top priority when they had achieved remarkable success in planting churches in the booming suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s? Raging internal conflicts over the use of historical-critical methods in seminaries or hot-burner issues of abortion or homosexuality, the creation of cumbersome bureaucracies,

<sup>23</sup> Kevin M. Kruse/Thomas J. Segrue (Ed.), *The New Suburban History*, Chicago 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*, New York 2011.



the rise to power of unrepresentative religious elites committed to political and social activism all seem to have rendered leaders in these mainstream denominations oblivious to demographic changes at the grass roots parish level.<sup>25</sup>

But geographic dislocations and relocations themselves are the product of a new demographic trend. Migration has increasingly come to be shaped not just by economic opportunity but by cultural and political convictions. To put it simply: even economic migrants are increasingly likely to seek out regions that mirror their political and cultural values. Numerous studies have documented how individual suburbs or even entire regions have become increasingly homogenous politically, as conservatives and progressives are attracted to regions or neighborhoods where people look and think like they do.<sup>26</sup> Not only do such changes explain part of the increased political polarization in the United States but they help make sense of recent religious transformations in which traditional clefs between denominations have been less important than the fissures within denominations between theological conservatives, moderates and liberals. It is something of a truism to note that a liberal Lutheran now has more in common with a liberal Roman Catholic than with a conservative Lutheran; a conservative Roman Catholic finds more common ground with a conservative evangelical than with a liberal member of the flock, particularly on flash-point issues such as gay-marriage, abortion, contraception, school choice and school curricula. What rational-choice theorists describe as a competitive religious marketplace in which denominational switching is taken to be a sign of religious vitality may simply be part of a larger trend towards increased political and cultural homogenization. In relocating to suburbs, cities or regions with like-minded persons, these migrants shed outdated denominational allegiances rooted originally in ethnicity or birth and join the churches located there, with which in some cases they may be more likely to share common political agendas and theological orientations.

<sup>25</sup> For accounts of the civil war within the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, see James Burkee, *Power, Politics and the Missouri Synod: A Conflict that Changed American Christianity*, Minneapolis 2011; Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, Grand Rapids 1999; for conflicts within the Episcopal church, see Miranda K. Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopalian Dissidents and their African Allies are reshaping Anglicanism*, Princeton 2007.

<sup>26</sup> A.I. Abramowitz/B. Alexander/M. Gunning, Incumbency, Redistricting, and Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections, in: *Journal of Politics*, 68 (2006), 71–88; J.G. Gimpel, *Separate Destinations: Migration, Immigration and the Politics of Place*, Ann Arbor 1999; Seth C. McKee/Jeremy M. Teigen, Probing the Reds and Blues: Sectionalism and Voter Location in the 2000 and 2004 U.S. Presidential Elections, in: *Political Geography*, 28 (2009), 484–495; Bill Bishop/Robert Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Cluster of Like-Minded America is Tearing us Apart*, Boston 2008. For criticisms of their argument, see Samuel J. Adams/Morris P. Fiorina, *The Big Sort that Wasn't: A Skeptical Reexamination*, in: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 45 (2012), 203–210. They argue that Bishop and Cushing rely primarily on anecdotal evidence and findings from pop sociology. They question his definition of «landslide counties» and argue that the patterns of residential segregation are nothing new to the United States in the 20th century.

Such migration streams help explain a defining factor of the American religious landscape. Some regions of the country maintain high levels of traditional religiosity, even as others have become increasingly «secular», as measured by surveys of religious belief and in rates of religious participation. The most secular regions include the new stronghold of the unchurched, Northern New England, the Pacific Northwest (including Alaska), the traditional bastion for the unaffiliated, as well as various large urban centers throughout the Midwest, Northeast and West Coast.<sup>27</sup> Rates of religious attendance in the two least-religious states, Vermont and New Hampshire, rival those of continental Europe.<sup>28</sup> The Northeastern states had historically been dominated by Roman Catholicism, mainstream Protestant denominations like the UCC, Methodists and Episcopalians, and the religious left, whose own membership hemorrhaging is a story in its own right. The most religiously devout regions, not surprisingly, are concentrated in the Deep South, Great Plains and Utah and southeast Idaho, both Mormon strongholds.<sup>29</sup> As social psychologists note, being surrounded by like-minded persons tends to increase the intensity with which humans hold on to their views.<sup>30</sup> In light of this observation, it is unlikely that regions of the country like the rural south, rural Appalachia, or outlying suburbs of Dallas, Texas or Atlanta, Georgia will shed their high levels of religiosity anytime soon, though college towns like Austin, Texas or gentrifying urban neighborhoods have bucked this trend by drawing in non-conformists from outlying regions.

At the same time, it is not difficult to foresee that the regions of the country with low levels of religious practice will see their already low levels decrease further, particularly as larger numbers of young unchurched persons flock to cities like Seattle, Portland, San Francisco or Boston or to regions like the Pacific Northwest west of the Cascade mountains. According to recent surveys, upwards

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.gallup.com/poll/153479/Mississippi-Religious-State.aspx?utm\\_source=alert&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=syndication&utm\\_content=morelink&utm\\_term=Politics%20-%20Religion%20-%20Religion%20and%20Social%20Trends%20-%20USA#1](http://www.gallup.com/poll/153479/Mississippi-Religious-State.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=syndication&utm_content=morelink&utm_term=Politics%20-%20Religion%20-%20Religion%20and%20Social%20Trends%20-%20USA#1) (19 Nov. 2012).

<sup>28</sup> See the Gallup figures from 2010. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125999/mississippians-go-church-most-vermonters-least.aspx> (5 Mar. 2013). The percentages of those indicating that they attended church «every week or almost every week» were 23 and 26 percent for Vermont and New Hampshire respectively. These figures remain higher than those for continental Europe, where the figures are typically less than 15 percent. But if one takes into account the reality that Americans tend to overstate their church attendance, the figures approximate those of most regions of Western Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 26–28. [http://www.gallup.com/poll/153479/Mississippi-Religious-State.aspx?utm\\_source=alert&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=syndication&utm\\_content=morelink&utm\\_term=Politics%20-%20Religion%20-%20Religion%20and%20Social%20Trends%20-%20USA#1](http://www.gallup.com/poll/153479/Mississippi-Religious-State.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=syndication&utm_content=morelink&utm_term=Politics%20-%20Religion%20-%20Religion%20and%20Social%20Trends%20-%20USA#1) (5 Mar. 2013).

<sup>30</sup> The literature here is vast. For an overview written for a popular audience, see Cass Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How like Minds Unite and Divide Us*, Oxford 2009. See also Geoffrey Munro/Peter Ditto, *Biased Assimilation, Attitude Polarization and Affect in Reactions to Stereotype-Relevant Scientific Information*, in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23 (1997), 636–653.



of 20 percent of young Americans now identify as atheists, agnostics or having «no religion» – a record high in the postwar era. By almost all accounts, their repulsion at the blatant fusion of church and politics, and in particular, the marriage of conservative Christianity to the Republican Party has been the greatest factor in their exodus from organized religion.<sup>31</sup> Who can escape the obvious fact that evangelicals, conservative Roman Catholics and Mormons overwhelmingly vote Republican?

### *Generational changes*

But such observations obscure a trend that sociologists of religion have long noted. In the postwar era, each subsequent generation – the so-called baby-boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and millennium generation – has shown lower rates of church attendance than its predecessor. As Robert Putnam argued in his landmark book, *Bowling Alone*, no generation has come close to equaling the levels of religious and civic participation of the World War II generation.<sup>32</sup> These generational paradigms that do not square away easily with rational choice theories. Theoretically, younger generations coming of age in an increasingly marketplace-driven and consumerist culture should have been more likely to take advantage of the religious choices presented to them – but this does not seem to be the case.

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to note that what many outside observers of the postwar American religious scene mistake for «American religious exceptionalism» was actually the expression of political and religious favor of two distinct groups. The first was the World War II generation with its seemingly limitless capacity for service to others and self-sacrifice. The second was the political rise of agitated religious conservatives – mostly evangelicals and conservative Catholics – who borrowed techniques of political mobilization from the religious left of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>33</sup> Beginning in the late 1970s, their ascent displaced the attention of the mainstream media from the religious left, which had been the focus of disproportionate coverage in the earlier decades, particularly during the heyday of the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam and the Second Vatican Council. It turns out that the actual number of Christians identifying themselves as evangelicals has risen only slightly in the last thirty years – and even the numbers of conservative Christians have now stopped rising.<sup>34</sup> In fact, some argue now that the evangelical world is entering a crisis, as

<sup>31</sup> For studies examining this trend, see Michael Hout/Claude S. Fischer, Why Americans have no Religious Preference: Politics and Generations, in: *American Sociological Review*, 67 (2002), 165–190. Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 120–121.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York 2000.

<sup>33</sup> See Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right made Political History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, New York 2012, 19.

the political strategies of the 1980s no longer achieve the same political results and trigger a backlash even among some young evangelicals.<sup>35</sup> But even a fall-off in numbers for young evangelicals cannot obscure an even larger trend. Since the 1970s, the numbers on the religious left and in the religious center fell tremendously, thereby bestowing upon evangelicals a greater proportional weight and, by default, the sense that they represent the heart and soul of American Christianity. Until recently, evangelicals have also had more children than mainstream Christians or non-Hispanic Roman Catholics and have upheld the faith tradition more effectively.<sup>36</sup>

### *Social class and religious transformation*

But even generational paradigms obscure as much as they reveal. Young persons in strongly «red» regions of America often display patterns of religiosity similar to that of their parents. It also turns out that declines in church attendance correlate strongly with social class. Contrary to common belief, poorer whites and unmarried mothers are now significantly more likely to avoid church than «intact» middle-class or upper-middle class families with more advanced education and higher incomes.<sup>37</sup>

### *Social welfare and religious transformation*

There is also one potentially decisive factor that correlates strongly with patterns of increased religious behavior – the role of religious communities in providing good works. According to Putnam, those active in religious communities become better neighbors and citizens. The more frequently people attend church, the more generous they become with their time and money – and not just to their church but to secular charities, schools and other volunteer organization.<sup>38</sup> They

<sup>35</sup> John Dickerson, *The Great American Evangelical Recession*, Grand Rapids 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Hout/Andrew Greeley/Melissa J. Wilde, *The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States*, in: *The American Journal of Sociology*, 107 (2001); Michael Hout/Claude Fischer, *Why more Americans have no Religious Preference: Politics and Generations*, in: *American Sociological Review*, 67 (2002), 165–190.

<sup>37</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox/Andrew J. Cherlin/Jeremy E. Uecker/Matthew Messel, *No Money, No Honey, No Church: The Deinstitutionalization of Religion among the White Working Class*, in: *Research in the Sociology of Work* (forthcoming). For a pdf version, see [http://www.virginia.edu/sociology/publications/Wilcox\\_Religion\\_WorkingPaper.pdf](http://www.virginia.edu/sociology/publications/Wilcox_Religion_WorkingPaper.pdf) (5 Mar. 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Roger Nemeth/Donald A. Luidens, *The Religious Basis of Charitable Giving in America: A Social Capital Perspective*, in: Corwin Smith (Ed.), *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, Waco 2003, 107–120; Peter Dobkin Hall, *Religion, Philanthropy and Civic Engagement in Twentieth Century America*, in: Arthur C. Brooks (Ed.), *Gifts of Money and Time: The Role of Charity in America's Communities*, Lanham 2005, 159–184. See the December 2011 report by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project «The civic and community engagement of religiously active Americans», <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-side-of-religious/Overview.aspx>; 19 Nov. 2012).

give in higher rates to the secular organizations than «secular» or «nonreligious» people.<sup>39</sup> It seems that under the social pressure of the community, good intentions multiply and altruistic natures start to take over, as individuals are inspired by the service of others.<sup>40</sup> Seeing faith in action, in turn, becomes a powerful recruiting tool for religious communities; even cynical, skeptical younger Americans can reportedly still be won back to religious communities through the power of service to others.<sup>41</sup>

The connection here to questions of American religious exceptionalism and of regional variations within religious behavior in the United States should be obvious. Rates of religious attendance and professed levels of faith correlate inversely to the extent to which local and state governments provide higher levels of charity, medical care and other forms of assistance to those in need. States where the welfare state is strong such as New York, Washington, Oregon and most of New England tend to show lower levels of religiosity than states like Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas or Oklahoma where the welfare state has been stripped back by conservative legislators or where it never fully took root. Correlation, of course, does not mean causality, but social historians need to examine carefully parish life at the grass roots level and ascertain the extent to which its vitality is facilitated or constrained by the goods and services of the welfare state. Direct service to others – and this would be a hypothesis that would need to be tested – may well prove to be spiritually far more invigorating than relegating charitable works and deeds to institutionalized religious bureaucracies like Catholic Charities or Lutheran World Relief, effective as these charities may be. One can also ask whether there is an inverse relationship between the size of national religious bureaucracies and the vitality of initiatives taken by local parishes of that denomination.

### *The limitations of statistical data*

And last but not least: the notion of an American religious exceptionalism is predicated upon the belief that the numbers attending church and the depth of faith remains higher than in continental Europe. But what if neither claim is entirely accurate? It is now commonly accepted that surveys that purport to determine when and how often Americans attend church or mass produce exaggerated results.<sup>42</sup> When asked whether they attended church last Sunday, many

<sup>39</sup> Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 443–479.

<sup>40</sup> See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, New York 2012, 246–273.

<sup>41</sup> Christian Smith/Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, New York 2005.

<sup>42</sup> This reality has been known for some time. For a pioneering study, see C. Kirk Hadaway/Penny L. Marler/M. Chaves, *What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at US Church Attendance*, in: *American Sociological Review*, 58 (1993), 741–752. These findings were

survey respondents will answer affirmatively, even if they have attended only once in the last six weeks. This observation is borne out on the ground by pastors and priests, who have long noted the fact that were responses to survey questions accurate, their half-empty pews would be full every Sunday. If survey results are recalibrated to reflect actual instead of claimed behavior, Americans occupy church pews at the levels not of 35 to 45 percent but of closer to 24 percent. Though much more likely to overstate church attendance, they attend church at rates not significantly higher than counterparts in more faithful regions of Western Europe.<sup>43</sup> Their attendance has been declining from 1975 to 2008 – not remaining stable as conventional surveys report.<sup>44</sup> While no studies on this topic yet exist, it is almost certain that most Americans also vastly overstate the extent to which they engage in prayer, meditation or other forms of spiritual activity, activities that are by definition extremely difficult to define and measure.<sup>45</sup> Surveys that examine how Americans spend their daily life make it clear that between television, commuting, working and household chores, there would be no time left for Americans to engage in the level of prayer they most respondents claim for themselves.<sup>46</sup> It is probably safe to assume – and this could be the study of further empirical research – that surveys seeking to gauge the extent of religious beliefs themselves might produce equally skewed results. Survey respondents might claim a belief in God even if they are troubled by severe doubts or if their views are closer to agnosticism.

And not least, it also seems that the number of Americans who could be classified as «evangelicals» has been vastly inflated. Many have taken survey results showing that 33 and 45 percent of Americans claim to be «born again» as

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bitterly contested by Andrew Greeley, the distinguished sociologist of religion. But their findings have been confirmed by a number of subsequent studies.

<sup>43</sup> Philip S. Brenner, *Exceptional Behavior or Exceptional Identity? Overreporting of church attendance in the U.S.*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75 (2011), 19–41; Philip S. Brenner, *Identity Importance and the Overreporting of Religious Service Attendance: Multiple Imputation of Religious Attendance using American Time Use Study and the General Social Survey*, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 50 (2011), 103–115; Philip S. Brenner, *Investigating the Biasing Effect of Identity Importance in Self-Reports of Socially Desirable Behavior*, in: *Sociological Focus*, 44 (2011), 55–75.

<sup>44</sup> Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion* (see note 34), 52–54. For the results of Gallup surveys (and a prognostication of a religious revival in the United States), see Frank Newport, *God is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*, New York 2012. It should be pointed out that the Gallup polls, and in particular, its polling of the American electorate during the 2012 Presidential election campaign, have been repeatedly criticized for their inaccuracies and methodological shortcomings. See: <http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/gallup-blew-its-presidential-polls-but-why-20121118> (10 Mar. 2013).

<sup>45</sup> For survey data on prayer, see the Pew religious Landscape Survey, [www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf), 52 (5 Mar. 2013).

<sup>46</sup> See the Time Use surveys carried out by the U.S. Department of Labor. See: <http://www.bls.gov/tus> (5 Mar. 2013).

evidence of the strength in numbers of American evangelicalism.<sup>47</sup> Claiming that one «being born again», however, does not necessarily indicate that one should be classified as an evangelical – many Christians belonging to mainstream denominations could have affirmed this claim since the term «evangelical» notoriously resists easy definition. In this vein, a series of recent studies indicates that the numbers of Americans who could be classified as evangelicals is no higher than ten percent, hovering with all likelihood closer to seven percent.<sup>48</sup> Survey respondents are evidently more likely to self-identify as evangelical, even if their actual spiritual beliefs and behavior would not, in fact, place them into more stringent categories used by most evangelical leaders as yardsticks.<sup>49</sup> It seems that it is all too easy to conflate the political power of prominent evangelical leaders and groups like Focus on the Family with actual strength in numbers.

### *Conclusions*

Is there an American religious exceptionalism? The answer would have to be «yes and no». For one, the European religious landscape is not entirely homogeneous, even if most commentators agree that Europe as a whole remains more «secular» than the United States. At the same time, the degree of religious practice and the depth of religious belief varies widely across the United States, closely mirroring the divide between red and blue Americas rooted in gender, social class, region, marital status and generation. Though on the whole Americans retain somewhat higher levels of religiosity than their cousins in Europe, portions of the United States increasingly resemble the barren post-Christian religious landscape of continental Europe with low faith commitments, low rates of church attendance. Though church attendance has declined noticeably since the early 1990s, churches remain full and professed levels of personal faith accordingly high in immigrant quarters and many portions of red America.<sup>50</sup>

These transformations clearly have unfolded dialectically, as both «red» and «blue» Americas tend to define themselves against the other, even if there are exceptions – church-going Democrats and even a minority of Mormons who vote for «blue» candidates.<sup>51</sup> To be sure, the categories of «red» and «blue» Americas obscure very real differences in employment structures, culture, religiosity, poli-

<sup>47</sup> Dickerson, *The Great American Evangelical Recession* (see note 35), 28.

<sup>48</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism, Embattled and Thriving*, Chicago 1998, 1; Christine Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation*, New York 2008; <<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/111-survey-explores-who-qualifies-as-an-evangelical>> (10 Mar. 2013).

<sup>49</sup> <<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/111-survey-explores-who-qualifies-as-an-evangelical>> (10 Mar. 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 108.

<sup>51</sup> Putnam/Campbell, *American Grace* (see note 7), 370–373.



tical ideologies within supposedly homogeneous regions.<sup>52</sup> Citizens of the «red» regions of rural Oregon act and comport themselves religiously very differently from counterparts in the «red» regions of rural Mississippi. This important qualification notwithstanding, it seems clear that changes in the political landscape of the United States since the 1960s and in religious values and institutions have gone hand-in-hand. And ironically, the values of tolerance and inclusion espoused by many young Americans and particularly strongly by the so-called «nones» are precisely those championed by representatives of the political left and liberal Christianity from the 1960s onwards. These movements triggered a backlash from both the political and religious right, which in turn generated its own backlash later in the 2000s. These values of inclusion and tolerance seem to have triumphed in many quarters. But they have now been shed of the transcendental elements which served as their original source of inspiration. This essay, hopefully, will have given a brief overview of some of these larger transformations.

This paper will hopefully have cast doubt on the utility of rational choice theory as a framework from which to understand the historical transformations in American religion since 1945 as well as on claims that a competitive marketplace lies at the heart of American spiritual distinctiveness.

*Religious Transformations since 1945: Is there an American Religious Exceptionalism?*

This paper challenges the notion that religion in the postwar United States can be adequately understood through the model of a competitive marketplace, as theorists of the so-called «rational choice» school would have it. More fundamentally, it questions the extent to which the postwar religious landscape in the United States can be understood as one of «American exceptionalism», in which American institutions followed a path fundamentally different from that of Europe. The similarities, this paper argues, increasingly outweigh the differences.

Religious Transformation – American exceptionalism – United States-Europe – rational choice-theory – competitive marketplace.

*Religiöse Transformationen seit 1945: Lässt sich von einem «American Exceptionalism» sprechen?*

Der Beitrag stellt die These in Frage, dass Religion in den USA der Nachkriegszeit durch das Modell eines kompetitiven Marktplatzes, wie Vertreter der sogenannten «rational choice»-Theorie es postulieren, zureichend verstanden werden kann. Darüber hinaus und fundamentaler hinterfragt er das Ausmass, nach welchem gerechtfertigter Weise die religiöse Landschaft der Nachkriegszeit als «American exceptionalism» verstanden werden kann, eine These gemäss welcher amerikanische Institutionen einen fundamental anderen Weg gingen als jene in Europa. Der Beitrag zeigt auf, wie die Gemeinsamkeiten gegenüber den Unterschieden zunehmend überwiegen.

Religiöse Transformation – American exceptionalism – Vereinigte Staaten-Europa – rational choice theory – kompetitiver Marktplatz.

<sup>52</sup> See Dante Chinni/James Gimpel, *Our Patchwork Nation: The Surprising Truth about the «real» America: The 12 Community Types that make up our Nation*, New York 2010.



*Transformations religieuses depuis 1945: peut-on parler d'un «exceptionnalisme américain»?*

Cette présentation examine la thèse selon laquelle la religion aux États-Unis d'après-guerre peut être comprise sur la base d'un modèle de marché compétitif, comme l'estiment les partisans de la théorie du «rational choice». De manière plus fondamentale, Mark Edward Ruff évalue le degré auquel le paysage religieux de l'après-guerre peut être décrit comme «exceptionnalisme américain», une thèse selon laquelle les institutions américaines ont pris un chemin totalement différent que les institutions européennes. La contribution montre que les points communs l'emportent progressivement sur les différences.

Transformations religieuses – American exceptionalism – États-Unis-Europe – rational choice theory – marché compétitif.

*Trasformazioni religiose dal 1945: è possibile parlare di un «American Exceptionalism»?*

Questo contributo mette in discussione la tesi che nell'America del dopoguerra la religione può essere compresa in modo adeguato attraverso il modello della competizione di mercato, come postulato dai rappresentanti delle cosiddette teorie del «rational choice». Inoltre, e soprattutto, questo contributo mette in discussione la portata del discorso secondo cui il paesaggio religioso nel dopoguerra può essere compreso come «American Exceptionalism», una tesi secondo la quale le istituzioni americane hanno preso una strada fondamentalmente diversa da quelle europee. Il contributo mostra come le somiglianze predominano in rapporto alle differenze.

Trasformazioni religiose – American exceptionalism – America-Europe – rational choice theory – modello della competizione di mercato.

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