Series Editors' Introduction

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN AMERICA

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What is the future of religion in America? Not too good, to judge by recent survey data. Between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of adults who said they had no religion—the so-called Nones—increased from the middle single digits to over 20 percent, a startling rise and one that was disproportionately found among the rising “millennial” generation. If the millennials remain as they are, and the generation after them follows their lead, one-third of Americans will be Nones before long. To be sure, there are no guarantees that this will happen; it has long been the case that Americans tend to disconnect from organized religion in their twenties then re-affiliate when they marry and have children. It is also important to recognize that those who say they have no religion are not saying that they have no religious beliefs or engage in no religious behavior. Most Nones in fact claim to believe in God, and many engage in a variety of religious practices, including prayer and worship attendance. Meanwhile, nearly four in five Americans continue to identify with a religious body or tradition—Christian for the most part but also Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Baha’i, Wiccan, New Age, and more. How have these various traditions changed? Which have grown and which declined? What sorts of beliefs and practices have Americans gravitated toward and which have they moved away from? How have religious impulses and movements affected public policy and the culture at large? If we are to project the future of religion in America, we need to know where it is today and the trajectory it took to get there.

Unfortunately, that knowledge is not easy to come by. For nearly half a century, the historians who are supposed to tell the story of religion in

America have shied away from bringing it past the 1960s. One reason for this has been their desire to distance themselves from a scholarly heritage they believe to have been excessively devoted to Protestant identities, perspectives, and agendas. Placing Protestantism at the center of the story has seemed like an act of illegitimate cultural hegemony in a society as religiously diverse as the United States has become over the past half century. "Textbook narratives that attempt to tell the 'whole story' of U.S. religious history have focused disproportionately on male, northeastern, Anglo-Saxon, mainline Protestants and their beliefs, institutions, and power," Thomas A. Tweed wrote in 1997, in a characteristic dismissal. Indeed, any attempt to construct a "master narrative" of the whole story has been deemed an inherently misleading form of historical discourse.

In recent decades, much of the best historical writing about religion in America has steered clear of summary accounts altogether, offering instead tightly focused ethnographies, studies based on gender and race analysis, meditations on consumer culture, and monographs on immigrants and outsiders and their distinctive perspectives on the larger society. Multiplicity has been its watchword. But as valuable as the multiplicity approach has been in shining a light on hitherto overlooked parts of the American religious landscape, it can be just as misleading as triumphalist Protestantism. To take one prominent example, in 2001 Diana Eck's *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* called for an end to conceptualizing the United States as in some sense Christian. Because of the 1965 immigration law, members of world religions were now here in strength, Eck (correctly) claimed. What she avoided discussing, however, was the relative weight of the world religions in society as a whole. As it turns out, although twenty-first-century America counts millions of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Taoists, and adherents of other world religions in its population, they total less than 5 percent of the population. Moreover, Eck omitted to note that the large majority of post-1965 immigrants have been Christian—for the most part Roman Catholics. Overall, close to three-quarters of Americans still identify as Christians of one sort or another.

While there is no doubt that the story of religion in America must account for the growth of religious diversity, since the 1970s substantial changes have taken place that have nothing to do with it. There is, we believe, no substitute for comprehensive narratives that describe and assess

how religious identity has changed and what the developments in the major religious institutions and traditions have been—and where they are headed. That is what the *Future of Religion in America* series seeks to provide. For the series, teams of experts have been asked to place the tradition they study in the contemporary American context, understood in quantitative as well as qualitative terms.

The appropriate place to begin remapping the religious landscape is with demographic data on changing religious identity. Advances in survey research now provide scholars with ample information about both the total national population and its constituent parts (by religious tradition, gender, age, region, race and ethnicity, education, and so on). As a resource for the series, the Lilly Endowment funded the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, the third in a series of comparable, very large random surveys of religious identity in the United States. With data points in 1990, 2001, and 2008, the ARIS series provided robust and reliable data on American religious change over time down to the state level that is capable of capturing the demography of the twenty largest American religious groups. Based on interviews with 54,000 subjects, ARIS 2008 has equipped our project to assess in detail the dramatic changes that have occurred over the past several decades in American religious life and to suggest major trends that organized religion faces in the coming decades. It has also allowed us to equip specialists in particular traditions to consider the broader connections and national contexts in which their subjects “do religion.”

The ARIS series suggests that a major reconfiguration of American religious life has taken place over the past quarter-century. Although signs of this reconfiguration were evident as early as the 1960s, not until the 1990s did they consolidate into a new pattern—one characterized by three salient phenomena. First, the large-scale and continuing immigration inaugurated by the 1965 immigration law not only introduced significant populations of adherents of world religions hitherto little represented in the United States but also, and more significantly, changed the face of American Christianity. Perhaps the most striking impact has been on the ethnic and geographical rearrangement of American Catholicism. There have been steep declines in Catholic affiliation in the Northeast and rapid growth in the South and West, thanks in large part to an increase in the population of Latinos, who currently constitute roughly one-third of the American Catholic population. California now has a higher proportion of

Catholics than New England, which, since the middle of the nineteenth century, had been by far the most Catholic region of the country.

A second major phenomenon is the realignment of non-Catholic Christians. As recently as 1960, half of all Americans identified with mainline Protestant denominations—Congregationalist, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and Northern Baptist. Since then, and especially since 1980, such identification has undergone a steep decline, and by 2015 was approaching 10 percent of the population. The weakening of the mainline is further revealed by the shrinkage of those simply identifying as “Protestant” from 17.2 million in 1990 to 5.2 million in 2008, reflecting the movement of loosely tied mainline Protestants away from any institutional religious identification. By contrast, over the same period those who identify as just “Christian” or “non-denominational Christian” more than doubled their share of the population, from 5 to 10.7 percent. Based on current demographic trends, these people, who tend to be associated with mega-churches and other non-denominational evangelical bodies, will soon equal the number of mainliners. In most parts of the country, adherents of Evangelicalism now outnumber mainliners by at least two to one in most parts of the country, making it the normative form of non-Catholic American Christianity. Simply put, American Protestantism is no longer the “two-party system” that historian Martin Marty identified a generation ago.

The third phenomenon is the rise of the Nones. Their prevalence varies from region to geographic region, with the Pacific Northwest and New England at the high end and the South and Midwest at the low. Americans of Asian, Jewish, and Irish background are particularly likely to identify as Nones. Likewise, Nones are disproportionately male and younger than those who claim a religious identity. But there is no region, no racial or ethnic group, no age or gender cohort that has not experienced a substantial increase in the proportion of those who say they have no religion. It is a truly national phenomenon, and one that is at the same time more significant and less significant than it appears. It is less significant because it implies that religious belief and behavior in America have declined to the same extent as religious identification, and that is simply not the case. But that very fact makes it more significant because it indicates that the rise of the Nones has at least as much to do with a change in the way Americans understand religious identity as it does with a disengagement from reli-

gion. In a word, there has been a shift away from understanding one's religious identity as inherited or "ascribed" and toward seeing it as something that individuals choose for themselves. This shift has huge implications for all religious groups in the country, as well as for American civil society as a whole. In order to make sense of it, some historical context is necessary.

During the colonial period, the state church model dominated American religious life. There were growing pressures to accommodate religious dissent, especially in the Middle Atlantic region, a hotbed of sectarian diversity. But there wasn't much of a free market for religion in the colonial period because religious identity was closely connected to particular ethnic or immigrant identities: the Presbyterianism of the Scots-Irish; the Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Anabaptism of various groups of Pennsylvania Germans; the Judaism of the Sephardic communities in Eastern seaboard cities; the Roman Catholicism of Maryland's English founding families. The emergence of revivalism in the late eighteenth century and the movement to terminate state establishments after the Revolution cut across this tradition of inherited religious identity. Different as they were, evangelical Protestants and Enlightenment deists—the coalition that elected Thomas Jefferson president—could together embrace disestablishment, toleration, and the primacy of individual religious conscience and choice. This introduced amazing diversity and religious change in the early nineteenth century, in what came to be known as the Second Great Awakening. Within a few decades, however, ascribed religious identity was back in the ascendancy. By the 1830s, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Disciples, and Episcopalians were establishing cultural networks—including denominational schools and colleges, mission organizations, and voluntary societies—within which committed families intermarried and built multi-generational religious identities.

The onset of massive migration from Europe in the 1840s strengthened the salience of ascribed religious identity, creating new, inward-looking communities as well as a deep and contentious division between the largely Roman Catholic immigrants and the Protestant "natives." Moderate and liberal Protestant denominations moved away from revivalism and sought self-perpetuation by "growing their own" members in families, Sunday Schools, and other denominational institutions. Religion as a dimension of relatively stable group identities persisted into the middle of the twentieth century; indeed, after World War II, sociologists saw it as a key foundation

of the American way. Will Herberg famously argued that the American people were divided into permanent pools of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, with little intermarriage. Yet by the end of the 1960s, it was clear that the century-long dominance of ascribed religious identity was under challenge. Interfaith marriage had become more common as barriers of prejudice and discrimination fell; secularization made religion seem optional to many people; and internal migration shook up established communities and living patterns.

In addition, conversion-oriented evangelical Protestantism was dramatically reviving, with an appeal based on individuals making personal decisions to follow Jesus. At the same time, a new generation of spiritual seekers was exploring religious frontiers beyond Judaism and Christianity. As at the end of the eighteenth century, evangelicals and post-Judeo-Christians together pushed Americans to reconceptualize religion as a matter of individual choice. By the 1990s, survey research indicated that religious bodies that staked their claims on ascribed identity—mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics above all, but also such ethno-religious groupings as Lutherans, Jews, and Eastern Orthodox—were suffering far greater loss of membership than communities committed to the view that religion is something you choose for yourself (evangelicals, religious liberals, and the “spiritual but not religious” folk we call metaphysicals). Within the religious communities that have depended on ascription, that news has been slow to penetrate.

The bottom line for the future of religion in America is that all religious groups are under pressure to adapt to a society where religious identity is increasingly seen as a matter of personal choice. Ascription won't disappear, but there is little doubt that it will play a significantly smaller role in the formation of Americans' religious identity. This is important information, not least because it affects various religious groups in profoundly different ways. It poses a particular challenge for those groups that have depended on ascribed identity to guarantee their numbers, challenging them to develop not only new means of keeping and attracting members but also new ways of conceptualizing and communicating who and what they are. Preeminent among such groups are the Jews, whose conception of religious identity has always been linked to parentage; only converts are known as “Jews by choice.” If to a lesser degree, Catholics and Mormons have historically been able to depend on ascriptive identity to keep their flocks in the fold. But in a world of choice, American Catholicism has

increasingly had to depend on new Latino immigrants to keep its numbers up, while the LDS church, focused more and more on converts from beyond the Mountain West, has had to change its ways to accommodate “Mormons by choice.”

In the wide perspective, what choice has done is to substantially weaken the middle ground between the extremes of religious commitment and indifference. With the option of “None” before them as an available category of identity, many Americans no longer feel the need to keep up the moderate degree of commitment that once assured that pews would be occupied on Sunday mornings. American society has become religiously bifurcated—a bifurcation signaled by political partisanship. Since the 1970s, the Republican Party has increasingly become the party of the more religious; the Democratic Party, the party of the less religious. In order to take account of this growing divide between the religious and the secular, the narrative of religion in America must thus go beyond both the Protestant hegemony story and the multiplicity story. The new understanding of religious identity as chosen, in a society where None is increasingly accepted as a legitimate choice, stands at the center of the narrative this series will construct.

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The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America