

American Religion: A Study of Religious Change from the 1920s through 1970s

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## Abstract

Religion in America persisted along traditional Christian lines until the 1870s. It was then that theological liberalism gained significant headway. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era were still infused with revivals and preachers but there was a growing contingent that challenged the fundamentals of Christian belief. Sometimes this contingent supported revivals but promoted social causes and brought unorthodox biblical interpretations. At other times, they challenged traditional Christianity altogether. By the Great Depression, American culture had undergone such a tremendous amount of change that, faced with adversity, the bottom of religion fell out. Fewer people attended services and contributed funds. More people looked to the government for salvation. A new technocratic, policy-centric tone overtook a previously moralistic outlook. At the same time, religion persisted and united people in advocating for themselves. By the time of World War II, chaplains served in different units and some individuals had unique religious experiences. After the war, the 1950s was a boom time for religion. With prosperity and victory, people went to their places of worship in gratitude. However, this met an abrupt halt in the 1960s. At first, religious leaders bolstered historic civil rights efforts. However, religious attendance declined. The 1970s had new evangelical efforts using technology. In addition, social issues like abortion led the religious to become more active politically. These periods lead into the modern era. Religion has entered politics and there is a split by faithfulness rather than denomination. This thesis explores the interplay between major historical events and religious developments, documenting what has charted the course to the state of religion in America today.

## Chapter 1

### The Transformation of American Religion

European settlement in what is now the United States began as early as 1607. Back then, settlers generally shared a common view of religion and the Bible had explicit influence on their colonies' laws and structure. Ministers were respected and religion played a central role in society. Over the next two centuries, these colonies grew and developed while historic events such as the American Revolution and the Civil War occurred. Throughout these times new religious sects emerged, but the prevailing religion held a traditional biblical viewpoint even as different denominations organized their communities in distinctive ways. That is not to say all Americans were equally devout. Still, the less religious generally did not organize themselves into movements challenging orthodox Christianity. And those who did, such as Anne Hutchinson, faced ramifications. Rather, most of those who were less religiously observant served as soldiers, farmers, lawyers, and other members of society. Most saw no need to agitate against churches because of their private doubts. There were exceptions to this such as the Unitarians, but these exceptions remained on the margins. Only from the 1870s did Americans generally begin entertaining thoughts and lines of arguments that contradicted the Bible to an extent that seriously threatened orthodoxy. Those decades were a period of industrialization in America and some religious members exposed themselves to higher criticism and theological liberalism in Europe and then planted them in America. For a while, traditional thinking prevailed but by the 1920s with looser morals, urbanization, and cultural battles such as the Scopes trial over teaching evolution, theological liberalism set in the nation.

Today there is a sizable minority of Americans who have an at best ambiguous relationship with God. Youth, generation after generation, have proved less religious than their

parents. There is a period in American history where something changed in the religious fiber of the nation. In the 1960s, America experienced a decline in religious observance. In 1960 Americans voted for or against Kennedy based on whether they were Catholic. In 2004, John Kerry, another Catholic, split the Catholic vote due to his stance on abortion and other religious issues.<sup>1</sup> Whereas American society used to be divided *by* religion, now it is divided *over* religion. The 1980s witnessed a new evangelical movement of organizations such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. Reagan was elected with evangelical support and George W. Bush claimed to be a born-again Christian. Even in the 1950s, Eisenhower was influenced by preacher Billy Graham.

Based on an examination of America's religious history, there is a major change between the past and the present. Today, many people hold secular views and stances that contradict commandments. In the past, there were people who did not observe all of their religion's tenets but they generally did not go around spreading alternative views. In this sense there has been a change, and the period this thesis explores covers the main turnabout. While the source of this change can be narrowed to the 1870s through the 1920s, its effect is found between the Great Depression and the rise of religion in politics in the late 1970s and 1980s. There are many events in this period: the Great Depression; World War II; protests over civil rights and the Vietnam War; the growth of government through the policies of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Great Society; the cultural backlash to 1960s radicalism; and the impeachment of Nixon. There is much to explore in the relationship of these events to corresponding religious developments after the spread of theological liberalism. While one can understand the spread of irreligious ideas over decades as society became less traditional, the effect of a changing society

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010), 1-2.

on religion is a more complex relationship which has bearing on how the country developed to its present cultural state. For those who are faithful, this is of immense importance as the less religious America becomes, the more trying is its relationship with God. Exploring the interplay between major historical events and religious developments between the 1920s and 1970s can do much to explain the subsequent period leading up to the present. In addition, one will see the relationship between peculiar religious ideas and declining religious observance nationally. The trends in this major aspect of America are the subject of this thesis.

This thesis examines how religion in America has changed from the 1920s through the 1970s. It finds that from the Great Depression through Gerald Ford's ascendancy to the presidency, America has become less religious and moved further from a traditional religious perspective. During the 1920s, while there were religious efforts along traditional lines, theological liberalism and looser morals permeated the nation. The Great Depression proved to be a crisis of faith. Only after World War II did religious activity in America recover, only to be disrupted in the following decades. The 1920s through 1970s represent a period of religious disruption that would be followed by the emergence of religion as a political entity in the decades after. Religious practice was different in the past and this is the period when it changed.

### **Theological Liberalism**

In the 1870s, the seeds of theological liberalism were planted and grew. In the preceding years, abolition was the cause of many an evangelical. There were other causes against alcohol, Catholicism, and Masonry, and for a Christian sabbath.<sup>2</sup> Scottish Common Sense Realism was

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<sup>2</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12-13.

predominant. It posed that aspects of morality were as knowable and concrete as objects of science and that through Baconian induction one could derive moral laws just as through experiment one could derive scientific laws. The Bible was the highest authority. Science would prove to reinforce it.<sup>3</sup> However, European ideas of biblical criticism began to be introduced in America. Higher criticism took hold in Germany in the 1830s and in Britain in the 1860s. It analyzed the origins of books of the Bible including their historical background, authorship, literary characteristics, and reliability. Over past centuries in Europe, a number of scholars questioned whether Moses authored the five books attributed to him. Some claimed the Pentateuch had four authors over five hundred years, notwithstanding the living testimony of millennia-old Jews who lived by this text and held it was written at one time by Moses. Believers in higher criticism came to America and influenced Americans who studied in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

One prominent case in 1891 was the heresy trial of Charles Augustus Briggs in the Presbyterian Church. This was a start to religious disruption. Briggs was the son of a businessman. After graduating from the University of Virginia and serving for a year in the Union army, he studied at Union Theological Seminary in 1861 and received his license in 1866. Then, he studied in Germany at the University of Berlin for three years, being exposed to higher criticism of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> He led a career as a pastor, and only later he took controversial positions publicly. One of the controversial positions was viewing history as separate from God and the Bible. Another was criticizing respect for the Bible and its authority. Briggs had a bias towards new knowledge and the methods of his time. He desired to revise to the centuries-old

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 14-16.

<sup>4</sup> Ira V. Brown, "The Higher Criticism Comes to America, 1880—1900," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society (1943-1961)* 38, No. 4 (1960): 194-196.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Ludlow, "American Old Testament Scholars: Charles Augustus Briggs," *The Old and New Testament Student* 12, No. 1 (1891): 7.

Westminster Confession according to contemporary values.<sup>6</sup> This document was passed by the Westminster Assembly in Britain in 1646 in order to reform the Anglican Church to make it compatible with Scottish Presbyterians and acceptable to the international Reformed community. It provided standardized articles of faith.<sup>7</sup> While Briggs took these views, still he held traditional Christian views on miracles in the Bible and the trinity. He was not the most radical, but his stances illustrated a change in religious views gaining steam. However, at that time, traditional views prevailed and the Presbyterian Church suspended him from the clergy.<sup>8</sup>

European ideas permeated not only preachers but also universities. In the mid-nineteenth century, many of America's best students went to Germany to pursue academic training. American colleges at the time did not expect students to generate new knowledge. There was a generation of educational leaders who used Germany as their model in reforming and establishing American institutions of higher learning. A big part of this was that a university provide a space free from theological constraints to pursue intellectual exploration.<sup>9</sup> The logic went: in the midst of higher criticism, scientific findings, and denial of miracles, people were finding contradictions in the Bible that could turn them off from their faith. Some such as William Rainey Harper, president of the newly established University of Chicago, wanted to address this by allowing people to study the Bible in a scholarly manner with rigorous criticism. This would salvage parts of Christianity, preempting individuals from rejecting it entirely.<sup>10</sup> By

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<sup>6</sup> Harvey Hill, "History and Heresy: Religious Authority and the Trial of Charles Augustus Briggs," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 20, No. 3 (2002), 1, 5, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Master, *A Question of Consensus: The Doctrine of Assurance after the Westminster Confession* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 51, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, "History and Heresy," 13, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Lee, "Higher Criticism and Higher Education at the University of Chicago: William Rainey Harper's Vision of Religion in the Research University," *History of Education Quarterly* 48, No. 4 (2008): 509-511.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 516, 529.

the end of the nineteenth century, theological liberalism was gaining traction as people's minds were opened to questions on religion not previously considered.

Beyond European influence, there were other factors at play with a secularizing influence on American religion. The Industrial Revolution in America changed the nature of employment by using new machinery. Capital replaced labor in some places, depriving workers of status. Instead, there was drudgery factory work.<sup>11</sup> The changed nature of labor could demoralize employees, hurting their religious morale too. Also, people were drawn increasingly to the cities from the countryside. This meant migrants removed themselves from their traditional religious communities and came in contact with new influences. Urban notions gained influence and spread. These were more materialistic and removed from biblical ethics. This was destructive to religiosity because people came to put economic matters above spiritual ones. Also, migrants were further from their families. Without that regulating influence and that of the community with which one grew up, people became more distant from religion.<sup>12</sup> There was a large influx of foreign migrants to cities, the majority of which were Catholic. As a result, in cities it was harder to find Protestant coreligionists and build new communities. Science gained a hold to the extent that people began doubting biblical miracles. In addition, Darwinism spread. The theory of evolution brought humans into the natural realm and deemphasized spirituality. And then there were all the clergy who went to Germany to study, like Briggs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James V. Heidinger II, *The Rise of Theological Liberalism and the Decline of American Methodism*, Kindle ed. (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), location 424.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, location 424-478.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, location 478-510.

## Historiography

The Progressive Era is defined as starting in the 1890s and ending in the 1920s. As to the historiography of religion in this period, there are a number of contemporary sources revealing the viewpoints of those times. Some land home today, such as the threat of culture to religion. Others are antiquated such as talk of the Anglo-Saxon race spreading Christianity to all corners of the globe. In addition, there is scholarship on the political efforts of the religious at this time. By exploring the historiography of this period, one gains a better sense of the changes taking place.

In his 1891 book *Our Country*, prominent preacher Josiah Strong echoed the trend of technological advances coupled with moral perils. Some of the perils he identified would be considered controversial today such as immigration and Catholicism. In addition, his view of the Anglo-Saxon race would be very unwelcome. Notwithstanding the author's lack of modern tolerance, *Our Country* was a popular book for its time and was considered progressive. Even President Herbert Hoover held some racist views while quietly integrating one of his departments.<sup>14</sup> *Our Country* opened by recounting agricultural inventions like the cotton gin and power loom, industrial advances like the railroad and steamboat, and improved communication such as news of the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882 reaching London within minutes.<sup>15</sup> In the fourth chapter, it discussed some European countries from which the author expected immigrants to come and appraised their situations. Then Strong raised concerns about criminal elements, immigrants' impact on liquor usage, Catholicism, socialism, and cities. He did not take

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<sup>14</sup> William E. Leuchtenberg, *Herbert Hoover: The American Presidents Series: The 31st President, 1929-1933*, illustrated ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 13, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, Kindle ed. (Miami: HardPress, 2017), location 69-72, 161-171.

a positive view of immigration in light of immigrants' different practices which would shake the norms of America.<sup>16</sup> Other issues he covered included Catholicism, religion and public schools, Mormonism, intemperance, socialism, wealth, cities, and exhaustion of public lands. Strong held views which would be questioned today, but he addressed many influences more recent sources raise as well.

In his 1913 essay "Christianity and Culture," theologian and founder of Westminster Theological Seminary J. Gresham Machen pointed out Christianity's losing battle in the intellectual realm. Machen was also subject to a controversy within the Presbyterian Church, in his case for holding more fundamentalist beliefs, albeit Machen would not identify as a fundamentalist. Rather, he formed his own denomination and seminary, as other evangelicals would in the decades to come. Machen was regarded as the first modern conservative Christian intellectual, harkening back to America's founding days when religious leaders like Jonathan Edwards were well-versed in the secular intellectual discussions of the day. In "Christianity and Culture," Machen identified the separation between education and religion and the predominance of materialism over spiritual matters as two areas of concern. He posited, "The Church is perishing to-day through the lack of thinking...She is winning victories in the sphere of material betterment."<sup>17</sup> He contrasted the desire to know with a desire to be saved. In a nutshell, the thought of the day at universities was irreligious, fewer believed in the core tenets of Christianity, Christianity was increasingly being rejected out of indifference, and the modern culture was not giving Christianity a hearing. This was quite a shift from America's revivals over the past century.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., location 582-641, 745, 765.

<sup>17</sup> J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *The Princeton Theological Review* 11, No. 1 (1913): 2, 10-11, 13.

Another key work of the Progressive Era was *The Fundamentals*, funded by oil magnate Lyman Stewart, promoting traditional Christianity en masse. Volumes were published between 1910 and 1915. Over three million copies were distributed in this period.<sup>18</sup> The title of this series is where the term fundamentalist originated. Each volume had a series of essays by different theologians. The first volume focused on traditional Christian beliefs about Jesus, proof for God, higher criticism, and a personal testimony. By addressing the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the authors hoped to counteract other views spreading and provide material for those with traditional views. The essay on proof for God focused on George Müller, a man from Bristol, England, who sought to care for orphans.<sup>19</sup> He prayed to God in private for support for his institution. For years, he withheld his annual report on the work he did so as not to appeal indirectly to the public for aid. In all, he provided schooling for over 80,000 children and Sunday school for nearly 33,000 children over 64 years. This included giving nearly two million bibles. Müller was able to offer this support from his investments. However, personally he lived frugally. That his enterprise survived despite no efforts to fundraise is the writer's proof that God was behind the work.<sup>20</sup> This is a sample of the type of viewpoint Stewart and others endeavored to capture.

The book *I'll Take My Stand* focused on the changes sweeping throughout the South as of 1930. These changes had an impact on religion. The book consisted of twelve essays, each by a different author. The first by Rhodes Scholar, World War I veteran, and Fugitive poet John

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<sup>18</sup> B. M. Pietsch, "Lyman Stewart and Early Fundamentalism," *Church History* 82, No. 3 (2013): 617–618.

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth, Volume I* (Chicago: Testimony Publishing, 1910), 5, 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 73-76, 83.

Crowe Ransom was entitled, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate.”<sup>21</sup> It spoke of the harmless Southerner devoted to the Lost Cause who is a subject of mockery. The author referenced the Southern way’s origins in English customs. He critiqued the gospel of progress as having no ultimate goal. He described slavery as “a feature monstrous enough in theory, but, more often than not, humane in practice” and decried abolition as having any revolutionary effect.<sup>22</sup> The author continued in defense of the South and in criticism of modern changes. Certainly he had a different vantage point than people today. Another essay was “Remarks on the Southern Religion” by Fugitive poet and National Medal for Literature winner Allen Tate.<sup>23</sup> The author bemoaned that at that time people did not have respect for the mysteries of religion, including himself. He mentioned history and pondered its degree of connection with the present. Also, he referred to Christianity as a myth. He critiqued that Christianity applied reason to scholasticism and adopted science to prove God’s workings. He contended that the parts of Christianity beyond reason should remain that way. He stated that this made religion hard to defend. Then he shifted to the South, referring to it as more religious than the North but trying to justify itself in secular terms. He said it withdrew too late. He drew comparisons with the North, and then concluded that the South lacked faith in God as it pursued its way, so it lost.<sup>24</sup> The essay is unusual in that its author both belittled Christianity yet cited its importance to Southern culture. He admitted he was irreligious. Both essays took pro-Confederate stances and alluded to culture overrunning the past.

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<sup>21</sup> “John Crow Ransom,” poets.org, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://poets.org/poet/john-crowe-ransom>.

<sup>22</sup> John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” in *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 2, 4, 8, 14.

<sup>23</sup> “Allen Tate,” Poetry Foundation, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/allen-tate>.

<sup>24</sup> Allen Tate, “Remarks on the Southern Religion” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, 155, 160, 162, 164, 166, 168, 174.

The book *Avenues of Faith* was written by Centenary College professor Samuel C. Shepherd, Jr., in 2001. It captures religious changes during the early 1900s, specifically in Richmond, Virginia. Congregations relied on lay leadership to manage many responsibilities. The city had denominational diversity and the sects often cooperated with one another, such as for saloon regulation and Sunday observance laws. There were six city-wide revivals. Some congregants relocated. A few had radio shows. Pew rents were phased out. People adopted new hymnals. Sermons began taking on contemporary as opposed to biblical issues.<sup>25</sup> Some congregations experienced growth and increasing budgets. Churches trained lay leaders and hired assistant pastors. Episcopalians paid for a city missionary who traveled, visiting the sick, aiding the needy, giving out Bibles and food, and providing religious services. Presbyterians sponsored weekly luncheon services in local plants.<sup>26</sup> Religious individuals formed groups such as the Anti-Saloon League. It alleged drinking led husbands to squander their wages, abuse their wives and children, and harass women or commit infidelity. The Anti-Saloon League entered politics, with saloon owners supporting local candidates who then proved lax on liquor restrictions. It tended toward education over political action at first. In 1916, a statewide prohibition law was passed, limiting purchases of alcohol to around a gallon per month. In 1919, the more restrictive constitutional amendment for Prohibition was passed. In addition, religious leaders campaigned against government corruption. Their efforts were less sustained and more intense, particularly in 1902, 1915, and 1918. They addressed a bribery conviction, city policemen not enforcing gambling or prostitution laws, and police involvement in liquor

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel C. Shepherd, Jr., *Avenues of Faith: Shaping the Urban Religious Culture of Richmond, Virginia, 1900–1929* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 19, 44-45, 49, 51-52.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-57.

trafficking and ignoring liquor offenses.<sup>27</sup> The religious served as an effective pressure group, albeit politicians did not necessarily succeed in carrying out their mandate. *Avenues of Faith* emphasizes that the main changes religiously in Richmond during the early 1900s were church growth and political efforts. From this angle, the religious did not stagnate amidst other trends but competed.

In addition to studies of the Progressive Era, there are books that cover longer spans of religious history, sometimes overlapping with the earlier period of this thesis's scope. It is worth reviewing some of these sources for their approaches. Some look at the development of theology. Some trace religious history through groups. Some consider religion in various eras. And most of these books do more than one. They are all broader but offer a perspective on religion over time as opposed to a specific period.

*America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, written by Mark A. Noll in 2002 focuses on the early days of religion in America. Noll mentions major figures in each generation and charts the general trend of religiosity over time. He writes of how republicanism merged with Christianity along with the Great Awakenings and how the Bible defined the conflict of the Civil War. Specifically, he examines why Americans were more explicitly Christian (and American) during the Civil War than the American Revolution.<sup>28</sup> His approach is thorough but there is not a sequel covering the period of this thesis.

In *A Religious History of the American People*, republished in 2004, Sydney E. Ahlstrom takes a broader historical view, beginning all the way back at the completion of the Council of Constance in 1418. He works his way through the Reformation, Puritanism, and religion in the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 105-107, 113, 115-117.

<sup>28</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xi-xii, 16.

American colonies. Then he examines the Great Awakenings, sectarianism, and the growth of Catholicism and Judaism in America. The remainder of the book proceeds by eras including the Civil War Era, the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, the Great Depression, post-war, the 1960s, and one chapter on the 1970s through the present.<sup>29</sup> The book is authoritative and lengthy yet covers what happens as opposed to why events happened. The author is not loyal to one sect but rather describes developments rather neutrally. This allows for a multiplicity of details but overlooks the theological rifts between each group. Ahlstrom comments on differences but in a book of such broad scope he writes with brevity in this area. For one who is unfamiliar with religious history, the book provides a great orientation, but further reading is required for a deeper grasp of the subject.

George M. Marsden examines one specific era (1870s theology to the Scopes trial in 1925) in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (2006, second edition). He goes beyond Ahlstrom to address Scottish Common Sense Realism, theological liberalism, premillennialism, postmillennialism, efforts in various churches, and the rise of the fundamentalist movement.<sup>30</sup> The book offers thorough details and introduces a number of historical figures, some of whom are mentioned here. Marsden shows how theological liberalism permeated the country, but he leaves the question of how it has affected American religion to the present unanswered beyond the book's scope.

A more recent book by Marsden from 2018, *Religion and American Culture*, comments on the broad eras of American religion from America's colonial founding to the present. However, as entitled, the book is a brief history. At times, he grapples with issues of the past

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<sup>29</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), vii-ix, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, xv-xvi.

through the lens of the present, such as evaluating the roles of enslaved African Americans and women in churches.<sup>31</sup> A scholar is free to make these comments but it jars the historicity of the subject. Instead of working to understand these areas as they were and how they developed to their present state, he presents information accompanied by judgments. It would be better to save these thoughts for the end of the book than disrupt the flow of his historical narrative. Marsden's book provides an overview of American religious history.

There are also a few books that look at religious trends. Robert Putnam examines religious statistics over the past decades and provides narrative on how religion in America changed from the 1950s to the present. A key finding is that there is a marked difference in religious attendance, traditional beliefs, and other areas. One piece Putnam addresses is why this happened, specifically how American culture was and how it changed. For example, the 1950s were a time when everyone went to religious services from a societal sense of duty and gratitude for prosperity following World War II. Putnam shows the modern story of how progressive generations became less religious and became turned off by the politicization of religion.<sup>32</sup> However, it is clear that the trends he demonstrates began before the period he studies. This thesis attempts to examine the turning point in American religious practice: the Great Depression.

Written in 2011, Rodney Stark's *The Triumph of Christianity* has the broadest scope of any book mentioned yet. It covers Christianity from its inception 2,000 years ago to the present. Among the topics Stark looks at are the leadership of Constantine, Christianity during the Middle Ages, and the spread of Christianity globally. One important fact is that the Church was not

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<sup>31</sup> George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture: A Brief History*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), vii, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Putnam, *American Grace*, 18, 81-83.

always opposed to science. Before political currents changed with the Protestant Reformation, the Church was generally supportive of scientific inquiry as a means of examining God's ever-complicated world.<sup>33</sup> While a much broader explanation of religious development which admittedly is lighter in some areas, Stark addresses an interesting topic: how Christianity spread to its current size and what that looked like. This thesis is not directly related to Stark's area of research but his work is an example of answering fundamental questions about a highly relevant topic. This thesis aspires to the significance achieved in Stark's work, examining how America went from a traditionally religious place to a country with a large minority of irreligious citizens.

While this is by no means an exhaustive historiographical review, it offers a look at different scopes, approaches, and significances to the area of religious historical development. Clearly, while the period of the 1870s to the 1970s is covered in other works, none examine the significance of declining religiosity in the manner of Putnam. As a result, there is a glaring explanatory hole of why the Great Depression was such a turning point for American religion.

### **Gilded Age Religion and Preachers**

Not all religious trends during the Progressive Era were negative. Dwight L. Moody was a prominent evangelist who worked in cities and spoke globally. He brought about a revival in Boston using mass media advertising. Newspapers were not all friendly but most covered his events.<sup>34</sup> Moody avoided controversial statements and theatrics. Also, he had a song leader named Ira Sankey. Moody used anecdotes and personal experiences to convey messages about a

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<sup>33</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 169, 237, 274-275, 387.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce J. Evensen, "'It Is a Marvel to Many People': Dwight L. Moody, Mass Media, and the New England Revival of 1877," *The New England Quarterly* 72, No. 2 (1999): 262, 267.

given topic, such as redemption or staying distant from sin.<sup>35</sup> There were certainly evangelical efforts amid liberalizing influences.

The Gilded Age was one era of American politics where religion contended with cultural developments. *The Gilded Age* by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley characterized the period with get-rich-quick schemes, vote buying, and corruption. Progressive historians claimed the major parties ran on similar issues. Only in the past decades did historical scholarship take a more nuanced and positive view of this time. The Republican Party supported big, activist government and focused on nationalism, prosperity, and morality.<sup>36</sup> Democrats wanted small government, laissez faire economics, states' rights, and personal liberties. They attracted ethnic and cultural groups as opposed to White Anglo-Saxon (northern) Protestants. Campaigns became popular spectacles with speakers and parades. Their members benefited from the spoils system. Voter turnout was around 25 percent higher than 2022.<sup>37</sup> However, this was a political landscape gradually moving away from religion.

President Benjamin Harrison represented the Republican blend between politics and religion. Privately very religious, Harrison attended Presbyterian-dominated Miami University (Ohio), married a Presbyterian minister's daughter, was elected an elder in a Presbyterian church in Indianapolis, and considered entering the ministry himself. He saw the outcome of the U.S. Civil War as a divine mandate to protect the rights of freedmen.<sup>38</sup> Harrison also emphasized republicanism, including majority rule and equality of men. He opposed gerrymandering,

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<sup>35</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 32, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Worth Robert Miller, "The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1, No. 1 (2002): 49-50.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>38</sup> Charles W. Calhoun, "Civil Religion and the Gilded Age Presidency: The Case of Benjamin Harrison," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23, No. 4 (1993): 654-656.

fraudulent voting, and voter suppression in the South. He saw republican government as dependent on a virtuous citizenry achieved through public schools. He believed in a free labor, unemployment benefits, worker safety, and the prompt payment of workers. In his 1897 book *This Country of Ours*, Harrison advocated the integrity of public administration, matching the Progressive movement for government reform.<sup>39</sup> Not all political issues of the Gilded Age were directly religious but the religious tended toward stances like those of Harrison.

One way to assess the religiosity of the Gilded Age is by reviewing preachers of the era. Some offered traditional messages, continuing America's unchanging religious heritage from the 1600s and 1700s. Other participated in revivals but had altered messages ranging from not taking the Bible literally to questioning core beliefs of Christianity. It was the rise of the latter, theologically liberal preachers, that shook and shifted the faith of Americans over decades. Traditional preachers were akin to the luminaries of past generations but now causes could overshadow "conversions" in ongoing revivals. With time, the social gospel took hold, which separated activism from traditional religion.

While espousing causes, some religious figures became distanced from a traditional biblical view, demonstrating the influence of theological liberalism. Sarah F. Smiley preached in northern Presbyterian pulpits. In a number of places, it was controversial for a woman to do this. On the one hand, she lectured against alcohol abuse and helped with Moody's revivals. She was featured in magazines and cited in a trial before the Chicago Presbyterian Assembly. However, she published books espousing the view that the Bible was allegorical and should be interpreted with liberty.<sup>40</sup> Frances E. Willard advocated for women's education, temperance reform, and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 657-660, 662.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Blum, "'Paul Has Been Forgotten': Women, Gender, and Revivalism during the Gilded Age," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 3, No. 3 (2004): 254-255.

suffrage. She became president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, with a membership of over two million. However, she went so far as to associate literal readings of the Bible with the subjugation of women and slavery.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, both women served to expand the role of women in Christian organizations. Ironically, they used women's only events at Moody's revivals to discuss gender prescriptions. Willard became something of a rival to Moody as a revival speaker. Moody in fact had her address one of his audiences, while he usually advocated women not lecturing to men.<sup>42</sup> In these cases, two people with political views similar to traditional religious Americans and who participated in major revivals at the same time espoused non-traditional views on the Bible.

There were also preachers who stuck with traditional views, such as A. C. Dixon. He lived from 1854 to 1925, during both the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Dixon was a Baptist, and his father was a preacher. Over the years, Dixon attacked Catholicism, liquor, licentiousness, gambling, the liberalism of Henry Ward Beecher, Christian Science, Unitarianism, higher criticism of the Bible, and more. He contended with theological liberals at the University of Chicago Divinity School as he led the Moody Memorial Church.<sup>43</sup> One book he published was *Through Night to Morning*. It included many sermons ranging from salvation, to prayers, to eternal life. The first, entitled "Joy Cometh in the Morning," focused on a quote from Psalm 30 that one may weep at night but there is joy in the morning. Dixon stated there are dark things such as the night, the cold, sin, and doubt. He continued, for Christians, Jesus is the light in the morning. Then he shifted to the power of God to heal. He noted the assertion of a scientist that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 256-258.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 260, 262-264.

<sup>43</sup> Gerald L. Priest, "A. C. Dixon, Chicago Liberals, and the Fundamentals," *DBSJ* 1 (Spring 1996): 113-115.

fertile parts of the Earth depend on deserts, and he drew the analogy that times of quiet in life bring fertility. Dixon concluded that one can grow in the dark times.<sup>44</sup> A. C. Dixon was an active premillennialist who fought what he might have called theological elements of darkness as he sought to bring the light of faith to his congregation.

By contrast, Henry Ward Beecher, the man Dixon criticized, was born in 1813. He was influential on American religion and theologically liberal. An article contemporary to Beecher described his liberal education in New England and his pursuit of a pastorate in Indianapolis. In 1847, he moved back east due to his wife's health. One person remarked that Beecher was a mix of a poet, an orator, and a philosopher.<sup>45</sup> While Beecher was prominent, he was known to bend his message to the crowd's tastes and appeal with style over substance. He contradicted some tenets of Christianity and left the Congregational Church to preempt church trials against him.<sup>46</sup> However, he was very popular. He preached on using one's life to help others, the comfort of God, confession, self-control, and more. In a sermon on helping others, he began that Jesus did this. He commented on voluntarily dying. Then he shifted to the use of one's life as opposed to its termination. He praised patriots, martyrs, and prisoners. He criticized the wealthy who are self-centered. He stated it is man's work to help others. He continued with remarks on a slender brook and a carpenter building a mansion, and then gave some social commentary.<sup>47</sup> The sermon was twelve pages long. It advocated a fine point that is loosely theological. It is agreeable yet vague. Compared with Dixon, who quoted the Bible multiple times in a more concise address, Beecher made merely an allusion and then went off on his own point. One can see how the

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<sup>44</sup> A. C. Dixon, *Through Night to Morning* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 2005), 1-5.

<sup>45</sup> "Henry Ward Beecher," *The Illustrated Magazine of Art* 1, No. 6 (1853): 369-370.

<sup>46</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 22, 24, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *The Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1869), 1-7.

sermon could both be popular and criticized. Henry Ward Beecher was a prominent preacher who dabbled in theological liberalism.

R. A. Torrey was another traditional preacher and an acolyte of Moody. He was educated at Yale and in Germany and then opted to minister on the frontier as a Congregationalist. Moody appointed him his school's first superintendent. Also, he served as pastor at Chicago Avenue Church from 1894 to 1906. He branched out to some worldwide evangelistic campaigns. He left the Moody Bible Institute in 1908, and then became dean of the newly established Bible Institute of Los Angeles and served for twelve years. From there he held evangelistic meetings and spoke at conferences until he passed in 1928.<sup>48</sup> In a sermon, "Some Reasons Why I Believe the Bible to Be the Word of God," Torrey discussed the fundamentalist point of the divine origin of scripture. He noted at one point he was a skeptic but came to believe this. As a reason why, he pointed to some passages from the Gospels. Then he spoke to the core Christian belief of the status of Jesus, believing him divine. He noted two people who tried and failed to remove the supernatural miracles from the Gospels.<sup>49</sup> This is the epitome of a fundamentalist sermon, reinforcing multiple core tenets of traditional Christian belief. Some points are distinctly Christian beliefs, but the main consideration is whether these individuals act in service to God. Unfortunately, as is seen today, the churches that have given up the fundamentals have discarded commandments later on.

Billy Sunday was perhaps the most famous preacher of the Progressive Era. He was

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<sup>48</sup> "Reuben Archer Torrey," Moody Global Ministries, accessed November 18, 2021, <https://library.moody.edu/archives/biographies/reuben-archer-torrey/>.

<sup>49</sup> "A Sermon by R. A. Torrey Sr.," Billy Graham Center Archives, last modified January 5, 2005, <https://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/torreysermon.html>.

incredibly popular with women.<sup>50</sup> He disliked liberals and believed the growth of theological liberalism came from a lack of orthodox preaching. His muscular, masculine, aggressive approach was to women's liking. In an appearance in Boston from 1916 to 1917, Sunday attracted 1.3 million people, including 60,000 who shook his hand. He was covered on the front page of the press. To a women-only audience he denounced divorce, birth control, abortion, marrying for money, ballroom dance, and women who evaded motherhood.<sup>51</sup> He believed women were more moral than men and that mothers needed to guard their families from sin. The text of his talk appeared in newspapers the next day. As a result of his sermon, nearly 2,000 mostly female converts joined Boston's two largest evangelical churches. In addition, Sunday wrote *Great Love Stories of the Bible* which painted biblical scenes like movie romances. He appealed to areas of popular romantic fiction such as innocent young girls, weeping mothers, and young men triumphing over temptation.<sup>52</sup> Sunday could be somewhat crude but in a plain way that appealed to many. He was an entertaining preacher who spread a traditional viewpoint in a modern style.<sup>53</sup>

Aimee Semple McPherson had the formative years of her ministry during the Progressive Era, although she preached during the Great Depression and beyond. As a Pentecostal, she avoided the fundamentalist-modernist split of the time and preached in a traditional evangelical style rather than a more intellectual approach. She operated out of Angelus Temple in Los Angeles and established a Bible college and a radio station. She presented narratives from the

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<sup>50</sup> Margaret Bendroth, "Why Women Loved Billy Sunday: Urban Revivalism and Popular Entertainment in Early Twentieth-Century American Culture," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 14, No. 2 (2004): 251-253.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 251, 253-254.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 255, 259-260.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 261-262.

Bible, personal anecdotes, and tales in sermons. She focused on experiential evidence of God's work in people's lives.<sup>54</sup> McPherson did not step away from political issues like Prohibition. On one occasion, she spoke of being asked by reporters on a boat trip to New York about her opinion on this. She referenced a lecture she had heard where the speaker, if he had his way, would empty all the liquor in the river. Then he proposed singing "Shall We Gather at the River?"<sup>55</sup> On another occasion, she gave one of her more typical sermons in 1916. She had a vision of a room of white pearl color with a similarly colored bench which she identified as a mercy seat. She thought she saw a cherub or a seraph which held a gold bowl filled with blood being sprinkled on the bench. Then she noticed herself kneeling on ashes. She saw a dead apple tree branch and a dead grapevine branch held in two hands which she took to represent salvation and the holy spirit respectively. They came back to life growing flowers and apples. She tightened her sackcloth, put ashes on her head, and bowed.<sup>56</sup> This sermon was more mystical than a standard preacher's sermon. McPherson could sound these more religious notes, although later on she was rocked by scandal.

### **Religion and Institutions**

In addition to preachers who either maintained or diverged from traditional views, there were also the institutions they built. Along with a gradual increase in heterodox Christianity, traditional leaders brought people into the fold through growing organizations in the early 1900s.

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<sup>54</sup> Kristy Maddux, "The Foursquare Gospel of Aimee Semple McPherson," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14, No. 2 (2011): 291-293, 311.

<sup>55</sup> "'Shall We Gather at the River?': Aimee Semple McPherson on Prohibition," *History Matters*, accessed November 6, 2021, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5071/>.

<sup>56</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Collected Sermons and Writings of Aimee Semple McPherson: Volume I*, Kindle ed. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2015), location 463-498.

This demonstrated that a decline in traditional views was not inevitable. Organizations that preached traditional Christianity included the Moody Bible Institute, the Young Men's Christian Association and the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions. The last involved over ten percent of the 379,000 college students in America. Along with these organizations, there was the work of Robert H. Gardiner, a lay Episcopalian who worked to unite the Christian denominations globally. By April 1911, he and two collaborators had reached out to Episcopal bishops, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, and Methodist bishops to organize them under his Faith and Order Movement. He had them appoint commissions for a conference. By July, he had 15 denominations on board. Also, Bishop A. C. A. Hall put forward an approved bibliography of major publications on church unity. Despite the momentum, World War I took away many involved youth, weakening the ranks of supportive organizations. Gardiner did not stagnate during the war but pressed for more action. A Panama Congress was held in February 1916, including missionary leaders from Latin America.<sup>57</sup> Efforts like these served to help unite Christians globally.

There were other efforts at institution-building. Iva Durham Vennard founded Epworth Evangelistic Institute in St. Louis for training Methodist deaconesses. When it was taken over by a district superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church while she was on maternity leave, she moved to Chicago and founded another training school called Chicago Evangelistic Institute (later known as Vennard College, which closed in 2008). Work like hers represented a paradigm shift from preaching at venues. Instead, people drawn into the religious fold would be trained for

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<sup>57</sup> John Frederick Woolverton, *Robert H. Gardiner and the Reunification of Worldwide Christianity in the Progressive Era* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 17-18, 195, 197, 208, 210.

evangelism and outreach. With both the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, women took on more roles as itinerant preachers and then institution builders.<sup>58</sup> Martha Moore Avery, a Catholic laywoman, cofounded the first Catholic evangelistic organization in the United States. Emma Ray, a former slave, transformed a rugged building into a rescue mission for African American children. Mattie Perry founded the Elhanan Training Institute before there was a public school in Marion, North Carolina. Duties for religious institutions included fundraising, entrepreneurship, publicity, executive roles in denominations, and school principal positions.<sup>59</sup> However, there was a split in approach among Protestants between facilitating “conversion” experiences and providing Christian communities for newcomers to gradually become religious. Another divide was between those who sought a sanctifying experience to distance themselves from sin in the short term versus in years’ time. Some emphasized Christian holiness teachings to encourage sanctification while others downplayed or removed this content.<sup>60</sup> As Christians shifted to a more institutional approach in the Progressive Era, splits emerged as to the content and approach of evangelizing.

Some Protestants found the style of preachers like Sunday distasteful for their sentimentality and passion. They preferred that religion be approached like other areas of knowledge in an intellectual, scientific manner. Yet these liberal evangelicals still claimed attachments to piety, evangelism, and “conversion.”<sup>61</sup> They saw revivals as chaotic and impersonal, obstructing people’s connection to the Gospels. They feared emotional appeals were

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<sup>58</sup> Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era*, Kindle ed., (New York: New York University Press, 2014), location 113-131, 166.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, location 188.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, location 216, 315.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew Bowman, “Antirevivalism and Its Discontents: Liberal Evangelicalism, the American City, and the Sunday School, 1900–1929,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 23, No. 2 (2013): 262-263.

not being followed up by pastoral work. In addition, they thought cities had a negative effect on religiosity, filled with moral corruptions and distractions. They disliked the businesslike manner of preachers like Moody and felt their messages were conflated with the excesses of urban life. Liberal evangelicals felt Sunday school was a better way to instill a Christian commitment, particularly in youth.<sup>62</sup> Ironically, some evangelicals saw their counterparts as having adopted too many modern notions in their approach to religion.

Another development during the Progressive Era was the social gospel. There were growing efforts to apply Christian ethics to social problems such as slums, crime, political corruption, and industrial unrest. These often accompanied a shift in focus away from a traditional biblical worldview. Social action became the substance of some congregations' religious experience. On the other hand, it helped denominations come together in the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. Ministers viewed sins as stemming from social factors and redemption as earthly and achieved through reforms. The emphases on materialism and the collective took away from spiritual notions, the power of miracles, and individual responsibility.

In part, the social gospel was a Protestant response to industrialization in the North. Hence, it was much slower to develop in the South. Even today, the South is one part of America where traditional religious views have held up.<sup>63</sup> However, this region struggled with illiteracy, farm tenancy, and racial discrimination, which were sufficient for social gospel style campaigns led by people from the middle class and professionals. Some successes included abolishing the prisons' convict leasing, combating hookworm, pellagra, and malaria, and passing child labor

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 265-269.

<sup>63</sup> John Lee Eighmy, "Religious Liberalism in the South during the Progressive Era," *Church History* 38, No. 3 (1969): 359.

laws. Money was put up to improve education. Ironically, alcohol prohibition fell into this fold too.<sup>64</sup> It was a cause both conservatives and liberals could get behind. The social gospel indeed addressed social problems during the Progressive Era but often dragged its members further from a traditional biblical viewpoint.

In addition, people made efforts towards political developments. The corresponding generation of political leaders shifted their focus to good governance, commonly associated with the removal of patronage or spoils systems, and the introduction of technocratic career tracks in agencies.<sup>65</sup> The election of President William McKinley is generally recognized as the point when American policy turned outward to an evangelical Protestant imperialism directed at Spanish-dependent colonies.<sup>66</sup> Over the next decades, America engaged in unprecedented wars and interventions to shift leadership favorably toward American interests under the guise of a renewed global Protestant civilizing mission. These energies reached a crescendo during World War I, says Sydney Ahlstrom:

As a result of the gargantuan effort of America's religious forces, over eleven thousand civilian service personnel accompanied the armed forces in Europe, while an uncounted but far larger contingent served in and around the military camps and stations at home...All across the land, local congregations became rallying points for volunteers and organizational centers for war work.<sup>67</sup>

As World War II would later have the impact of permanently enlarging government, World War I had the impact of organizing and consolidating religious groups across denominations. With greater funds and size came greater standing in society in the decade to follow.

The 1920s witnessed a number of business-oriented developments as American religious

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 361-364.

<sup>65</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 127, 129.

<sup>66</sup> Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 879.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 891.

institutions flexed their muscles. Growing administrations increased the scale and influence of religious organizations, a boon for traditional religion. Following the armistice of World War I, religious organizations continued fundraising, using some of the same state-of-the-art sales techniques as business and the U.S. government.<sup>68</sup> And business was on the rise, whether it be a book on Jesus called *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925) by advertising executive Bruce Barton lauding him as a business organizer, President Coolidge declaring America's business is business, or ministers adopting the lifestyles of their more affluent congregants. Notably, there was the famous Scopes trial over teaching Darwinism in public schools in July 1925 which embarrassed evangelicals, leading them to withdraw from public light for a generation.<sup>69</sup> In addition, observance of the Puritan sabbath was in decline. Even as churches had more resources than before, fundamentalists were losing headway in the culture amidst affluence, urbanization, and modern pleasures. This could also be seen as youth adopted traditionally taboo practices such as smoking, dancing, and ladies not covering their knees. When the unprecedented crash of 1929 occurred, it is no shock that Americans' faith was shaken. Religious leaders made themselves identifiable allies of business and preached the gospel of wealth, only for the very institutions with which they partnered to be shaken.<sup>70</sup>

### **Fundamentalism**

During the late 1910s and 1920s, fundamentalists organized to defend the *fundamentals* of the Christian faith. One notable moment was after Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered a sermon

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 896.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 905, 909.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 915.

entitled, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” In it, he attacked fundamentalists as “illiberal and intolerant.” He stated the need to integrate new knowledge with faith. He advocated the freedom to disbelieve Christian orthodoxy on miracles from the Gospels. He criticized fundamentalist attempts to regulate certain knowledge from the classroom, such as in areas of biology and evolution. Fosdick disliked how fundamentalists cast people out for shifting to non-traditional beliefs. He defended people who did not believe the Bible is inerrant. He juxtaposed liberals and fundamentalists and asked rhetorically who would prevail in the Christian church.<sup>71</sup>

Clarence Macartney responded with a sermon in kind: “Shall Unbelief Win?” His and others’ efforts were a response to the proliferation of theologically liberal views. He began by noting the lucidity and lack of hostility of Fosdick’s sermon relative to other liberal ones. He repeated a comment made to him that Fosdick should be retained by his church because of his social reform efforts. Macartney then raised the possibility that Fosdick could repent from his unorthodox views. Unfortunately, there was an increasing tendency “to brand as illiberal, medieval and narrow” anyone who criticized popular religious thought as un-Christian. Macartney stated the Christian church does not defend its faith. He proceeded to examine Fosdick’s views on Christian doctrines including virgin birth, inspiration of the Bible, the second coming of the messiah, and atonement. His conclusion was that through the rationalizing modernist movement, Christianity was at risk of omitting Jesus and God.<sup>72</sup> In some congregations today, indeed there is little focus on either with instead a focus on good deeds and identity politics, some of which contradict the Bible. Regrettably, Macartney was reasonably

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<sup>71</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, “‘Shall the Fundamentalists Win?’: Defending Liberal Protestantism in the 1920s,” *History Matters*, accessed November 15, 2021, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>.

<sup>72</sup> Clarence Macartney, “‘Shall Unbelief Win?’: A Reply to Dr. Fosdick, by Clarence Macartney,” *The Aquila Report*, last modified July 17, 2014, <https://www.theaquilareport.com/shall-unbelief-win-a-reply-to-dr-fosdick-by-clarence-macartney/>.

accurate about the trajectory of Christianity.

As an aside, Macartney published a book in 1945. In alphabetical order he addressed topics such as Abraham, action, and adversity. Entries could be an anecdote, biblical commentary, or a quote from the Bible.<sup>73</sup> The work is an example of what adherents to a traditional biblical perspective could produce. Instead of sowing seeds of doubt, religious leaders could provide stories of faith. The Bible could be used as a tool for inspiration rather than an object of criticism.

The 1925 Scopes trial was over a Tennessee law banning evolution from being taught. This proved a turning point for fundamentalists, causing them to withdraw from the public sphere. The teacher, John Scopes, volunteered to use a textbook which covered this material, although it is likely he did not teach it in the class. When he was arrested, the trial was advertised to bring attention to Dayton, Tennessee. It garnered more attention when prominent criminal defense attorney Clarence Darrow and former Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan took on the two sides of the case. At one point, Bryan agreed to go on the stand to testify to his beliefs. Darrow got Bryan to acknowledge the passage in Genesis which said God created the world in six days could be understood as something other than six solar days. This was reported in the media as a big loss for evangelicals. John Scopes was found guilty and assessed a 100 dollar fine. Later the Tennessee Supreme Court acquitted him on a technicality.<sup>74</sup> While it could be said Bryan made a small admission, given the context and coverage it was a big moment which led the religious to withdraw from public view for decades after being mocked by the press. In this way, the Scopes trial was a defining moment in the battle between a

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<sup>73</sup> Clarence Macartney, *Macartney's Illustrations*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), 9-10.

<sup>74</sup> William E. Ellis and Charles Reagan Wilson, "Scopes Trial," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 10: Law and Politics*, ed. James W. Ely and Bradley G. Bond (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 123, 125.

secular and a biblical perspective.

### **Conclusion**

Patterns of interpretation for the periods leading into the Great Depression range from narrow ones like the role of women, details of a preacher, and sources that describe a specific period to sources that take a broader outlook and primary sources which provide content from historical figures. For whatever reason—perhaps because scholars feel women have been overlooked in the periods of study—some secondary sources take a particular focus on women. In some cases, they prove irreligious, fighting for social causes while distancing from the fundamentals of Christianity. In other cases, they are revivalists in their own rights. Details on preachers are more typical historical works and situate the reader to some of the famous voices of the period under study. Primary sources with sermons and speeches serve to complement this background information. There are also sources which focus on a specific period or details. Research comes in different media and not all can afford the scope of this thesis. The articles are insightful and can be weaved together to provide a broader picture. Sources that take a broader outlook help in this regard.

In all, the Gilded Age experienced the inception of theological liberalism in America. Over the Progressive Era, religious figures took on causes but became more distant from a traditional Christian viewpoint. There were still prominent fundamentalist preachers. But with the decades, the culture shifted. The religious backed World War I and business prosperity. They developed new institutions to involve more people in Christianity. But when a depression came, there was less practically to say. Instead, eyes turned to government action. The relative

inactivity of the Hoover administration proved insufficient. The further the country proceeded in depression, the more it took its eyes off of a traditional Christian viewpoint. America religiosity had been whittled at for decades upon decades. It was with the Great Depression that this came to a head with Americans' faith. The following chapter will focus on religion through the Great Depression and World War II. The chapter after will examine the period of increased religiosity after the war, the religious setback of the 1960s, and the response of the 1970s.

## Chapter 2

### American Faith, the Great Depression, and World War II

After the changes particularly during the Progressive Era, American religion was fragile but holding on. There were people who diluted Christianity, questioning its core beliefs. However, they did not form their own sects over differences of belief. Rather, they conquered existing sects. For the common person, one was not necessarily exposed to new charters but one did hear sacrilegious thoughts and questions. During the Great Depression, religious practice changed from the past. Individuals who declared themselves for theological liberalism had more prominence than in previous eras. The 1920s had looser morals, so some ebbed away from religion due to non-religious influences like urbanization, dancing, and fashion.<sup>1</sup> One would not argue that there was a time in America where every American was devoutly religious. But in the past, while one might be distant from Christian practice there was not an alternative. By the 1920s, there was. Part of this had to do with religion being subsumed by policy and the economy during the Great Depression.

The Great Depression was a turning point in the faith of many Americans. Finally, the challenges to an individual's relationship with God from those who strayed from tradition were met with an economic crisis that challenged Americans' livelihoods. Charitable giving and church membership declined. People looked to the government not God. Church leaders who had enjoyed the prosperity of the past decade and wedded themselves with business interests spoke of America being punished for the excesses of the 1920s, but they did not offer a practical way forward for many Americans. Not all Americans gave up their faith, but some did. They may not

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<sup>1</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 915.

subscribe to theologically liberal views but neither did they hold to traditional ones. Americans found ways to make do, but times were hard and many reached out to the government. For Catholics and Jews, this was also true. Whereas before, each had their communities that coexisted with Protestants, with the Depression some Jews attended synagogue less and Catholics reached out for government support for their schools. Not only was Protestantism whittled at by theological liberalism; American Catholicism and Judaism were weakened by economic struggles. However, religion survived, in part due to emerging evangelical Protestant educational institutions.

Understanding the Great Depression is essential to understanding the religious culture that emerged during that time. The Great Depression lasted over a decade. Religious figures continued on with messages, but much of the nation was united by poverty. Hence, most religious developments of the period center around the government. The Roosevelt administration did not replace churches but people did shift their reliance there. World War II saw chaplains who could be a moral force in their units and missionary journeys of faith, but religious developments during this period were limited mostly to war-related endeavors. What was significant was the effect this period would have on future decades and generations of faith. The years after the war will be examined in the following chapter but it is worth noting that the Great Depression is when American faith lost its dominance. The Scopes trial made the more religious withdraw, but economic crisis jarred Americans from their religious bearings. And by exploring some government policies, one will see how they overshadowed religious messages. Additional evangelical efforts beyond those maintained throughout the Depression would only take place during World War II, another transitional period where religion had a new backdrop. From global missions to evangelizing Japanese internees, new initiatives arose that renewed religion's prominence but in less observant environments. These efforts echoed America's new

global role and the public's variety of opinions about this. The Great Depression left a mark on America's religious fabric which now will be explored.

### **The Great Depression's Impact on Religion**

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the *New York Times* had a sermons page. On October 28, 1929, it revealed a public significantly more religiously involved than today. Articles ranged from former President Theodore Roosevelt's faith, to an opening in the Episcopal Church being followed under general news, to mentioning of a Catholic feast.<sup>2</sup> As the "recession" set, there was mounting unemployment, and breadlines became the norm for some. Those lines might lead to a church.<sup>3</sup> However, as represented by evangelist Dwight L. Moody in decades prior, a person in poverty focused much more on bread than the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Economic hardship put stress on families, affecting children's religious upbringings. Employment of married women increased during the 1930s. Housework multiplied. Families employed subsistence strategies, including planting gardens, fixing old clothes, and downgrading housing. In addition, the birth rate dropped from ninety-eight in one thousand in 1925 to seventy-six in one thousand in 1933.<sup>5</sup> Women figured out how to make do as Roosevelt's policy solution

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<sup>2</sup> "Tells Roosevelt's Faith.; Dr. Reisner Says Late President Never Missed Church," *New York Times*, October 28, 1929, <https://www.nytimes.com/1929/10/28/archives/tells-roosevelts-faith-dr-reisner-says-late-president-never-missed.html?searchResultPosition=26>; "Dr. Stires Backed for Episcopal Post," *New York Times*, October 28, 1929, <https://www.nytimes.com/1929/10/28/archives/dr-stires-backed-for-episcopal-post-is-one-of-3-prominently.html?searchResultPosition=12>; "Catholics Observe Feast of the King," *New York Times*, October 28, 1929, <https://www.nytimes.com/1929/10/28/archives/catholics-observe-feast-of-the-king-mgr-lavelle-preaches-at-st.html?searchResultPosition=29>.

<sup>3</sup> Leuchtenberg, *Herbert Hoover*, 103-106.

<sup>4</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Lois R. Helmbold, "Beyond the Family Economy: Black and White Working-Class Women during the Great Depression," *Feminist Studies* 13, No. 3 (Autumn 1987): 635, 638.

fell short. Enough social and economic changes were visible to shake the faith of Americans who lived in the parts of the country that were not the utmost religious. There were letdowns from religious leaders who trusted their partners in business. People could rely less on God when they navigated hard economic circumstances. Leaders failed to turn the economy around promptly. All of these factors could understandably bring about not only a depression in national spirit and economics but also faith.

Amidst this period of growing uncertainty, evangelicals continued to preach, maintaining traditional Christianity. The years following the World War I armistice were already trying times that saw the political nascence of and adoption of the term fundamentalists—“a response to the spread of what was perceived as false doctrine” within churches. Specifically, the war drew parallels with Daniel’s prophecy of a final war and when it ended, jingoism against Russian communism and German rationalism remained amidst economic adjustments, strikes, and even a few terrorist bombings.<sup>6</sup> Surprisingly not as much of an adjustment was seen among evangelicals during the Great Depression—it was a consequence of the nation’s sinfulness. Preachers maintained traditional topics, sometimes delving into politics. For example, James Cannon, Jr. was involved in campaigning against Al Smith in 1928, only to see his influence fall during the Depression.<sup>7</sup> By contrast Charles Coughlin saw his star rise during those years, offering a mix of traditional topics and political campaigning.<sup>8</sup> One can survey the content of other influential

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<sup>6</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 153, 159.

<sup>7</sup> “Bishop Cannon defies lobby probers on political activities...,” Prints & Photographs Online Catalog, Library of Congress, last modified June 3, 1930, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003669753/>; Michael S. Patterson, “The Fall of a Bishop: James Cannon, Jr., Versus Carter Glass,” *The Journal of Southern History* 39, No. 4 (Nov. 1973): 493.

<sup>8</sup> Charles E. Coughlin, *Father Coughlin's Radio Sermons: October, 1930--April, 1931 Complete* (Baltimore, MD: Knox & O’Leary, 1931), 6-7.

figures: Billy Sunday; William B. Riley; and Harry Emerson Fosdick.<sup>9</sup> There were also contemporaneous magazines: *Preacher's Magazine*; *The Watchman Examiner*; and *The Presbyterian*.<sup>10</sup> Theological liberalism seemed to have shaken the religious establishment more than an economic crisis, which fit nicely into their preaching.

The Bible Institute of Los Angeles published *The King's Business*, a magazine. This fundamentalist periodical provides insight into the messages given during an economic crisis. In a 1933 article "Daniel and the Doom of World Governments," W. B. Riley wrote of how history demonstrated prophecy, especially Daniel's. Then he turned to his present times, commenting on the instability of governments around the world. He stated science, an area superlatively valued, may bring disaster. He wrote with concern about birth control, machinery bringing unemployment, and the destructive potential of contemporaneous warfare. But in the face of these he raised the prospect of the Messianic Era.<sup>11</sup> While not exactly tuned into the average person's daily concerns, this article conveyed grander issues that were food for thought for those struggling not as much.

In a 1936 article, "Around the King's Table," Paul Rood wrote that with the threat of financial disaster in inflation, the nation needed a revival. He quoted scripture about God closing the skies from rain, and sending a pestilence and locusts to devour the land. Only by turning to God and praying would God spare His people. Rood saw the economy as tied to God's will.

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<sup>9</sup> "1931 Billy Sunday Preacher," MyFootage.com, posted on February 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GII553Tj6vI>; Bennie P. Blount, *21 Sermons By Evangelist Billy Sunday*, 7; "Billy Sunday Here After Many Years," *New York Times*, May 6, 1930, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1930/05/06/96118984.html?pageNumber=11>; William B. Riley, *Is Christ Coming Again?* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1930), 2; "Harry Emerson Fosdick," PCA Historical Center, last modified 2018, <https://pcahistory.org/ms/fosdick.html>.

<sup>10</sup> J. B. Chapman, "The Tempter of the Preacher," *The Preacher's Magazine* 5, No. 11 (Nov. 1930): 321.

<sup>11</sup> W. B. Riley, "Daniel and the Doom of World Governments," *King's Business* 272 (June 1933): 176-178, 195.

Then he shifted to the World's Christian Fundamentals Association annual convention held in Toronto. He declared the global need for evangelization and recounted "over a hundred young people dedicated their lives to full-time service" at the event.<sup>12</sup> Last, he touched on using evangelism to reach people who otherwise would not be exposed to scripture. In the article there was a mix of concerns both economic and spiritual.

A 1940 sermon considered John's suffering and doubts over Jesus, tying in with contemporaneous economic hardship and theological liberalism. Then Robert Laidlaw shifted to personal suffering, such as an operation he had that had a complication or a widow grieving her late husband. He encouraged readers to look to figures in the Bible for support. Last, he emphasized triumph over one's circumstances comes from trust in God.<sup>13</sup> This article encouraged readers to commit themselves to their faith, even amidst suffering and concern.

Not all Christian messages were positive. Gerald L. K. Smith was the national organizer for Senator Huey Long's Share Our Wealth clubs and a collaborator with Charles Coughlin, but he was most known for his anti-Semitism. He published a monthly, *The Cross and the Flag*, and founded organizations such as the Christian Nationalist Crusade. However, he would not use the phrase anti-Semite to describe himself. He would call himself objective, drawing from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious forgery. In his later years, each day he would dictate articles for his monthly until he became too angry and agitated to continue. The observer of Smith who noted this also noticed his tendency to exaggerate. He did not see Smith use notes, check facts, or proof transcripts. Smith was an example of an uglier element that arose during the

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<sup>12</sup> Paul W. Rood, "Around the King's Table," *King's Business* 342 (June 1936): 211-212.

<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Laidlaw, "Whose Prisoner Are You?" *King's Business* 363 (June 1940): 209, 212-213.

Depression.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, during the Great Depression missionary activity decreased. There were 4.7 percent fewer missionaries in 1929 than 1923. Churches reported declines in attendance too, particularly in cities. Sunday school enrollment dropped too. Ministers were not held quite as highly by the public. The social gospel also had a slump until the 1930s. People instead focused on government policy and their economic struggles. There was skepticism and disillusionment in the decade after World War I which crept into the religious sphere.<sup>15</sup> An opinion study found 67 percent of publications on traditional Christianity in 1930 were unfavorable compared with 22 percent in 1905. Protestantism was deeply wrapped in the culture, including commercialism and business prosperity. This diluted it and made it vulnerable to national trends. Church budgets decreased and churches went through struggles like businesses did. However, sects grew and attracted those less well-to-do. Theological liberalism was limited in its application and ability to speak to the moment. On the one hand, it had gained huge ground over the past decades, but now some were abandoning religion altogether.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the abandonment of religion took form in the shift from Progressive Era values to New Deal values. Whereas progressivism had emphasized patriotism, conscience, morals, and duty, Roosevelt's advisers shied away from notions of tragedy, sin, and God. Instead, they focused on policy logistics and administration. On the other hand, the president himself appealed to religion, using such language, symbols, and moral missives in his speeches.<sup>17</sup> In one, he

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<sup>14</sup> Glen Jeansonne, "Arkansas's Minister of Hate: A Research Odyssey," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 59, No. 4 (2000): 429, 432-433.

<sup>15</sup> Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935," *Church History* 29, No. 1 (1960): 4-6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-10.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Isetti, "The Moneychangers of the Temple: FDR, American Civil Religion, and the New Deal," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, No. 3 (1996): 678.

appealed to religious unity despite different beliefs and that people should focus on mutual understanding rather than disagreements. He made the point that irreligion was the real danger. Franklin D. Roosevelt even hoped for a revival of religious spirit.<sup>18</sup> In his first inaugural address, Roosevelt shied from linking loose morals of the previous decade to the Great Depression, instead blaming moneychangers who deceived the nation.<sup>19</sup> Between the Great Depression and the Roosevelt administration, the nation entered a less religious, more worldly era.

### **Great Depression Life and Sermons**

One way to assess the Depression's impact is by reviewing contemporaneous farm life. Mildred Armstrong Kalish wrote about how her father was banished from the family when she was five and her grandparents settled her mother, herself, and her other three siblings on one of their farms in Iowa. The grandparents were successful enough to own four farms but with the Depression they had concerns about receiving rents. They used this money to pay taxes on the land. Without it, they would lose their farmland. The grandfather's brother and sister each lost a farm, machinery, and livestock in this manner.<sup>20</sup> The grandfather regularly went to church with his grandchildren, and the mother and grandmother attended sporadically. Neither had friends outside the family. Kalish recalls looking forward to church for its fellowship and its belief in God's watchful benevolence. The children said a blessing over dinner and recited a prayer before they went to sleep. The family was Methodist and there were six churches of different

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<sup>18</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Radio Address on Brotherhood Day," The American Presidency Project, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-brotherhood-day>.

<sup>19</sup> Isetti, "The Moneychangers of the Temple: FDR, American Civil Religion, and the New Deal," 680.

<sup>20</sup> Mildred Armstrong Kalish, *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression* (New York: Bantam Books, 2007), 11, 14-15.

denominations in its rural area. Community leaders were also primarily Methodist.<sup>21</sup> Kalish recalls attending a revival at a neighboring church with a friend of hers that proved to be a bit much for her as her friend spoke on the sinfulness of humans. Another feature of her childhood was Sunday school where she learned to pray, sing, and believe in the Gospels. While a Presbyterian church closed a few years before the Great Depression, church was a supportive community for Kalish.<sup>22</sup> While churches struggled during the Depression, still they served this role.

Pentecostalism in general spread during the Great Depression. In the 1930s, Pentecostals had popular periodicals like *The Latter Rain Evangel*, *The Glad Tidings Herald*, and *The Pentecostal Evangel*, which emphasized a link between the economic crisis and spiritual decay.<sup>23</sup> For example, one article posed, “it seems that there is a perfectly logical cause for the depression...the Church was the element in the world to preserve it from corruption. Now it is not hard to see that the Church has failed in this regard.”<sup>24</sup> Other religious magazines sounded this theme too. Some preachers on the left emphasized a social gospel, advocating schemes such as consumer cooperatives run by farmers. Others spoke of the moral refinements from living in poverty, indicating that hardships made one more like Jesus.<sup>25</sup> There were a number of messages circulating during the Depression years. Yet another was that the economic crisis was cause for repentance, revival, and reform. The key was to trust in God. Unfortunately, the Depression put a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 69-71.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 73-74, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Heather D. Curtis, “‘God Is Not Affected by the Depression’ Pentecostal Missions during the 1930s,” *Church History* 80, No. 3 (2011): 581.

<sup>24</sup> Bert E. Williams, “The Depression: Its Cause, Consequence and Cure,” *The Latter Rain Evangel* 24, No. 6 (1932): 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan H. Ebel, “In Every Cup of Bitterness, Sweetness: California Christianity in the Great Depression,” *Church History* 80, No. 3 (2011): 595-597.

financial strain on missionary work that had previously been expanding. However, Pentecostals were able to raise the funds to expand missionary work throughout the decade.<sup>26</sup> Pentecostals were an exception to decline in the religious sphere.

The Great Depression was a dramatic time to deliver sermons. Reverend F. W. McGee gave a sermon entitled “The Love of God” the year before the Depression. There was singing accompanied by a piano. Then the preacher spoke the traditional Christian line that God demonstrated His love to humanity through Jesus’s sacrifice from the Christian standpoint. He stated that God came down from heaven. He remarked how God lifts the lowly. Then the choir returned to the initial song.<sup>27</sup> The chorus was “Love Lifted Me,” a popular hymn written by James Rowe in 1912 about Jesus and his followers at sea in Matthew.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Reverend J. M. Gates gave a number of sermons during the Depression. One was entitled “Born to Die.” He asked, “Am I born to die?” He said this was a question each person had to ask oneself. Then the piano played. He discussed his consideration a bit. He focused on how he would die eventually after visiting a friend buried in a cemetery. Then there was more music.<sup>29</sup> A second sermon had the name “Prepare to Meet Thy God.” He emphasized one has to meet God somewhere. He mentioned one walking with God. The sermon was also responsive, with congregants chanting “Yeah” in response to their reverend. In addition, there was a singer.<sup>30</sup> These particular sermons

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<sup>26</sup> Curtis, “‘God Is Not Affected by the Depression’ Pentecostal Missions during the 1930s,” 583-584, 586, 588.

<sup>27</sup> F. W. McGee, “The Love of God,” Internet Archive, posted on May 6, 2020, [https://archive.org/details/78\\_the-love-of-god\\_rev-f-w-mcgee-mcgee\\_gbia0187497b/The+Love+of+God++Rev.+F.+W.+McGee++MCGee.flac](https://archive.org/details/78_the-love-of-god_rev-f-w-mcgee-mcgee_gbia0187497b/The+Love+of+God++Rev.+F.+W.+McGee++MCGee.flac).

<sup>28</sup> “Love Lifted Me,” GodTube, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.godtube.com/popular-hymns/love-lifted-me/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Born to Die,” YouTube.com, posted on November 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m16eQZjy1Qo>.

<sup>30</sup> “Prepare To Meet Thy God,” YouTube.com, posted on November 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOQmcUuY5C0>.

were musical but their topics were serious. While struggles kept people from church, the matters discussed still weighed on them.

During the Great Depression evangelicals also invested in institutions, a means for religion to survive and prosper. While the northern Presbyterians and the Episcopalians declined by 5.0 and 6.7 percent respectively between 1926 and 1936, evangelicals had Bible institutes like the Philadelphia School of the Bible, the Moody Bible Institute, and the Bible Institute of Los Angeles which published magazines and encouraged radio broadcasting. For radio programs, there were Charles E. Fuller's "Old-Fashioned Revival Hour," Martin R. DeHaan's "Radio Bible Class," and Donald Gray Barnhouse's "Bible Study Hour."<sup>31</sup> There were also a few fundamentalist colleges including Wheaton College, Bob Jones College, and Gordon College of Missions and Theology. Between 1929 and 1940, evangelical colleges' enrollment doubled. In addition, organizers held Bible conferences at resort-style locations that were akin to camp meetings with biblical lectures from leading preachers. They offered different programs as well focusing on missions, youth, pastoring, Bible study, prophecy, sacred music, and more. In addition, fundamentalists maintained missions over the Great Depression. Denominations such as the Assemblies of God, the Church of the Nazarene, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Southern Baptists all had significant rises in membership ranging from 25 percent to over 100 percent.<sup>32</sup> Over the 1930s some groups bucked the general religious trend and laid foundations for the future.

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<sup>31</sup> Joel A. Carpenter, "Fundamentalist Institutions and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism, 1929-1942," *Church History* 49, No. 1 (1980): 65-69, 71-72.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

## Religious Groups' Reactions

Catholics came to rely on religious institutions during the Great Depression for advocacy, in contrast with Protestant ones' emphasis on education. This could take the form of organizing behind them to seek government aid. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) addressed issues facing Catholic farmers. It was reluctant to engage in social action and supported voluntarism in the economy while opposing atheism associated with government intervention. The main solutions the NCRLC advocated were cooperative associations, agricultural education, and increasing ownership. Cooperatives ranged from marketing to finance to consumer. Producer cooperatives reeked of socialism. Credit unions were the most prominent. For education, the NCRLC emphasized learning more efficient production techniques at agricultural colleges. Only later did agricultural economists realize this was a formula for greater surpluses and lower prices. On ownership, the NCRLC did not lend practical support.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, between 1929 and 1932 farm prices and agricultural income halved and between 1930 and 1934 around a million farmers lost their farms. Farmers went on strike and practiced intimidation at foreclosure sales to restore properties to their previous owners. Churches provided some relief to farmers struggling from crop failure. However, at first the NCRLC took an approach like Hoover relying on volunteerism and hoping the economic depression would pass on. It made no statement on the Great Depression until 1931. Eventually, it got behind advocating for more family farms which ironically would reduce supply as compared with production methods of large producers. However, Catholics shifted their reliance to the government, supporting Roosevelt's election, calling for governmental aid to agriculture, and

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<sup>33</sup> David S. Bovée, *The Church and the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923-2007* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 85-89.

desiring debt relief and a domestic allotment plan.<sup>34</sup> The NCRLC is an example of a religious organization during the Depression that people looked to, only to switch to the solutions being offered by the government.

Some preachers involved themselves in economic causes, often tailoring their preaching to it. Claude Williams, along with buying a pool table for his church and hosting movies and baseball on Sundays, invited labor organizers to use his church. He believed it was up to the poor to bring righteousness to the people. Through these contacts, he became interested in Marxism. He ended up becoming the pastor for local union workers who funded a new building for him. He supported a mining strike and was made aware of a plot to bomb the mines, which he spoke against.<sup>35</sup> He involved himself in union members' efforts to elect their own leaders, against the opposition of the local union organizer. Throughout all this, he strove to remain in the Presbyterian denomination, believing nationally he had allies who supported his efforts. He organized a conference for labor and religious activists, inviting speakers, only to be derailed by being ejected from his church. Next, he became involved with socialist who helped organize the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in eastern Arkansas.<sup>36</sup> For some, it seems economic issues overshadowed preaching.

Another Great Depression era cause was a battle by a Catholic archbishop to gain public funding for parochial schools, as opposed to Protestants whose views were still represented in public schools. This is an example of how economic necessity overshadowed religious messaging. Joseph Schrembs was appointed as the first bishop of Toledo, Ohio, in 1911. Over

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 90, 92, 94.

<sup>35</sup> Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 41-42, 45, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 50, 52-53, 55.

ten years, he established 13 parishes and 33 schools. In 1921, he was installed as bishop of Cleveland. There he continued his efforts in education but suffered from lack of funding. As a result, he applied for public assistance and was at first unsuccessful. Catholics had attempted this since 1840 without success. When the Depression struck, circumstances became more dire. The Diocese of Cleveland had over 450,000 Catholics who were mostly working class and ethnic. This included nearly 55,000 students in 132 elementary schools in 1923.<sup>37</sup> Schrembs attempted to address the need for more high schools and colleges. He had a number of facilities built including Notre Dame College in 1928. However, the Depression caused 41,000 workers to lose their jobs as of April 1930. This grew another 60,000 the following year. The failure of two of Cleveland's prestigious banks jeopardized the situation of Catholic schools. The diocese lost \$5 million in deposits. These institutions also handled the majority of parish mortgages. They came to collect, demanding a debt of over \$10 million be paid over 233 parishes. In advocating for public funds, Schrembs's attorneys pointed out public schools included students who went to parochial and private schools in their district in their count of pupils, receiving an inflated amount of funding. Diocesan superintendents calculated that they saved the state of Ohio \$14,763,000 per year. Yet another point of argument was Catholics still paid taxes for public schools too. In addition, some Protestant private schools received public funds.<sup>38</sup> In all, Catholic leaders wanted fewer dollars than public schools while still desiring to keep their schools out of the government's control. Their efforts met some opposition that tended to argue for a separation of church and state. In addition, Catholic leaders had hope in a federal bill for school relief. However, President Roosevelt opposed it. Efforts came down to a state-level bill in 1935 that

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<sup>37</sup> Martin Poluse, "Archbishop Joseph Schrembs's Battle to Obtain Public Assistance for the Parochial Schools of Cleveland during the Great Depression," *The Catholic Historical Review* 83, No. 3 (1997): 429-430, 432.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 433-434, 436-437.

passed in its Senate but failed in its House of Representatives. The Cleveland diocese was left to bear the costs of Great Depression setbacks.<sup>39</sup>

Catholics as a group were active during the Great Depression. There were calls for social activism, economic reform and anti-Communism and involvement in the New Deal Coalition and a Steel Workers' Union. James Cox, a clergy in Pittsburgh, mobilized the unemployed to vote against Republicans in 1932 for the failure of their policies. Also, he provided food via a soup kitchen and hope to them. Reverend Carl Hensler and the editors of the *Pittsburgh Catholic* believed poverty came both from an unjust wage system and immoral, self-destructive behavior. A few clergy drew from Leo XIII's encyclical *The Condition of Labor* to found a labor school specializing in Catholic social thought a few years before the Depression. Reverend Casimir Orlemanski decried sweatshops' use of child labor. Another effort was raising \$8 million to help starving families via the Allegheny County Emergency Association.<sup>40</sup> While the Great Depression made for tough times, Catholics involved themselves in politics and social welfare. In a sense, their identity was strengthened under adversity as they sought greater acceptance in America.

Along with Catholics, Jews were integral to the reshaping of the American religious landscape during and in the wake of the Great Depression. They switched their support in the 1920s to the Democrats, as opposed to Protestants who were split between the parties. Al Smith campaigned that religion should not disqualify one from office. They supported Roosevelt's welfare state from the beginning. Also, Jews had concern for their coreligionists abroad. They supported interventionist policies. There were divisions to an extent. A minority

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 438, 441, 446, 450.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth J. Heineman, *A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 11, 15-16, 35, 41, 43.

supported isolationism and some even opposed the admission of Jewish refugees in 1937 and 1938. However, it was their strong support for Roosevelt by 1940 that gave them less political leverage. There were Jewish lawyers in the Roosevelt administration who served as a bridge to the Jewish community.<sup>41</sup> Added to this were Jewish scientists, technocrats, intellectuals, and social workers. They could not prevail on policies that had a political price, such as the Wagner-Rogers Bill which would have admitted 20,000 mostly Jewish children to the country beyond its quota. Also, the State Department cancelled an extension of visitors' visas made after Kristallnacht.<sup>42</sup> While politically involved, many Jews were not orthodox in their religious observance. They achieved high posts but they were regarded as an interest group, ethnicity was more of a bond between them than religious practice, and they received tepid support from the Roosevelt administration.

Beyond political involvement, Jews also had a distinct religious experience during the Great Depression. The economy overshadowed American Judaism. There was a synagogue building boom both in the 1920s and after World War II that was halted by the tough economy. In the 1930s, synagogues struggled with mortgage debts and shrinking membership. Some of them cut annual dues or allowed them to be paid in installments. Some families could no longer spare the money from their budget in an economic crisis. As a response, synagogues sold tickets for the holidays of Rosh HaShanah (the Jewish new year) and Yom Kippur (the day of atonement) to non-members.<sup>43</sup> Staff diminished programs and laid off some employees. Jews (and Christians) dealt with widespread religious apathy. In one case, a man attended synagogue

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<sup>41</sup> Henry L. Feingold, "Crisis and Response: American Jewish Leadership during the Roosevelt Years," *Modern Judaism* 8, No. 2 (1988): 103-104.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106.

<sup>43</sup> Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 166-167, 172-174.

regularly until his business failed. Many became preoccupied with economic struggles, neglecting religious life.<sup>44</sup> Notwithstanding the Depression, 75 percent of New York Jewish youth did not attend any religious services in 1935, and 80 percent of Jewish children in New York City received no religious instruction or even learned the Hebrew alphabet as of 1929. Social and cultural programs were a response to attract people. Synagogues tried to broaden their role. One phenomenon was mushroom synagogues which hired amateurs to lead religious services for poorer Jews who paid them a lesser fee. Synagogues leaned on sisterhoods for fundraising.<sup>45</sup> At one point, Jews, Protestants, and Catholics united in a Drive for Religious Recovery, urging religious attendance on a weekend in October 1935. With the passage of legislation on working conditions, Jews campaigned for greater sabbath observance. Some synagogues, predominantly Reform, would only work with firms that accepted organized labor and collective bargaining. In short, the Great Depression was a struggle for synagogues that exposed a membership of a minority of Jews to further decline.<sup>46</sup>

### **Policy and Religion**

Not to neglect larger events that were happening, for President Roosevelt's first two terms, the government engaged in a series of programs to provide jobs and relief to the millions of unemployed workers who had struggled to get by under President Herbert Hoover. It was to these some Americans shifted their faith from religious community. In addition, Congress passed some regulations of industries and social welfare legislation. Collectively, these efforts were

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 170, 173-174.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 175-176, 184.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 178-179, 181-182, 184.

known as the New Deal. Roosevelt's first eight years can be broken down into a four-year period of winning elections, passing massive legislation, and seeing the economy gradually recover its strength, a two-year period of recession where Roosevelt rolled back programs, faced resistance from Congress to pass more legislation, and lost eighty-one House seats and eight Senate seats, and a two-year prewar boom.<sup>47</sup> Those most affected by the Great Depression were industrial workers in the North who found success unionizing, sharecroppers in the South who made the best of their position with low pay and limited government relief, and tenant farmers in the Midwest who suffered from low crop prices and being forced off the land on which they worked under the auspices of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration.<sup>48</sup> In all, the New Deal consisted of numerous efforts to stimulate the economy and address growing poverty. While the efforts did something, for many they proved half-measures too small to bring decent living. At the same time, unemployment was reduced and many did benefit from government jobs. While under normal circumstances, engaging in massive government spending and hiring for many federal jobs would infringe on the private market, the absence of activity produced the results of President Hoover's years where the economy only got worse as the depression brought poverty to more of the country.

The Roosevelt administration's legislation was not explicitly religious but it did affect peoples' outlook on religion. That the government was intervening often overshadowed any religious message from a preacher. For example, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), passed in May 1933, was one of the first major bills made into law under Roosevelt. Businesses were allowed to draft industry-wide codes exempt from antitrust laws which should set minimum

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<sup>47</sup> William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963), 271.

<sup>48</sup> James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 12.

wages and maximum hours, the government now would license businesses, and labor was allowed to do collective bargaining. Also, \$3.3 billion was provided to a newly established Public Works Administration.<sup>49</sup> Part of the law's intent was to reduce competition by regulating bad practices. The code would allow an industry to regulate itself against bad actors, making the industry more humane and allowing for greater profits.<sup>50</sup> A code for the cotton industry abolished child labor in mills. Also, because of increased labor costs and deflation in the economy, the newly established National Recovery Administration allowed manufacturers to limit production, with the intent of boosting the price of cotton. Factory production and industrial stocks increased significantly by July, trying to set practices before codes for their industries were established.<sup>51</sup>

Over a few months, industries adopted codes to establish labor norms and fair competition until in 1935 the Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional before it was set to expire in June. New industry standards would change Americans' lives more than church services. The issue in question was whether Congress had unconstitutionally given legislative power to the executive branch of government.<sup>52</sup> The Fair Labor Standards Act, the Wagner Act, and the National Labor Relations Act were passed in response, addressing minimum wages and rights of labor. Critics of NIRA charged it promoted monopoly. In addition, in some industries firms deviated from the codes.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the Public Works Administration provided

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<sup>49</sup> Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 57-58.

<sup>50</sup> William L. Anderson, "Risk and the National Industrial Recovery Act: An Empirical Evaluation," *Public Choice* 103, No. 1/2 (2000): 141.

<sup>51</sup> Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> "National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA)," U.S. Conlawpedia, accessed on December 20, 2021, <http://sites.gsu.edu/us-constipedia/national-industry-recovery-act-nira/>.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, "Risk and the National Industrial Recovery Act: An Empirical Evaluation," 146-147.

two million jobs and the law introduced standards which are in place across all industries today.<sup>54</sup> Legislation of this magnitude had the power to garner ministers' support even as some decried the expanded role of government. Given the dramatic decline in the economy and the impact of NIRA and follow-up bills on industry, many people's day-to-day lives were affected both by the Great Depression and the New Deal.

The Roosevelt administration also focused on supporting those unemployed and struggling for work. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) was established in May 1933 to ensure the adequacy of relief measures and provide work for those able on relief rolls. Some have estimated that three-fourths of heads of families on relief could work. The FERA endeavored to give jobs in keeping with individuals' previous experience and private sector working conditions. Also, it built up local relief organizations. In part this was achieved via grant funding to states based on the information they provided on their economies. Surprisingly from today's standpoint, most states had little experience with work relief programs and struggled to arrange appropriate work for white-collar workers. The FERA proved to be a starting point off which additional programs built.<sup>55</sup>

Another development over the Great Depression was the consolidation of unions. In dire economic circumstances, unions had the potential to improve workers' conditions. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 was another government initiative that went beyond what churches had the power to provide. It made discrimination based on union activities or affiliation illegal for employers, certified unions to represent workers, and established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The significance of certifications was if multiple unions tried to

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<sup>54</sup> Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 69.

<sup>55</sup> "Essay: The Federal Emergency Relief Administration," University Libraries University of Washington, accessed on December 20, 2021, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/feraweb/essay.html>.

represent workers, negotiations were likely to be less successful. Having only one certified union to represent all workers, as decided by a majority, meant more level negotiations. The law also entailed good faith collective bargaining.<sup>56</sup> The NLRB did the certifications and supervised their elections. In addition, it could hear complaints from workers, issue cease-and-desist orders, and petition the courts for the authority to enforce its decisions. Over ten years following its inception, the NLRB held twenty-four thousand elections involving over six million workers, heard thirty-six thousand unfair labor practices cases, invalidated two thousand company unions, reinstated three hundred thousand employees dismissed for union involvement, and forced industries to pay over nine million dollars in back wages.<sup>57</sup> Unions were a major beneficiary of Roosevelt policies and became reliable Democratic supporters, as did others.

Like relief, unions were not tied to religious organizations. Exploring a few New Deal policies demonstrates how no pastor could outmatch the federal government in changing a person's material wellbeing. However, there were concerted efforts by charitable organizations. In 1933, the *New York Times* recognized the Salvation Army for its works during the Great Depression.<sup>58</sup> Ex-president Hoover personally appealed to Americans to support the organization in 1935.<sup>59</sup> By 1942, this charity was operating in 97 countries and colonies.<sup>60</sup> The Salvation Army would use newspapers to advertise its needs, such as in one instance \$150,000 for veterans

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<sup>56</sup> "National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)," *Employment Law Handbook*, accessed on December 20, 2021, <https://www.employmentlawhandbook.com/federal-employment-and-labor-laws/nlra/>; "National Labor Relations Act: Everything You Need to Know," *UpCounsel*, accessed on December 20, 2021, <https://www.upcounsel.com/national-labor-relations-act>.

<sup>57</sup> T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Blackside, Inc., 1993), 266-267.

<sup>58</sup> "The Salvation Army," *New York Times*, February 28, 1933, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/02/28/119090932.html?pageNumber=18>.

<sup>59</sup> Herbert Hoover, "Salvation Army," *New York Times*, April 14, 1935, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1935/04/14/issue.html>.

<sup>60</sup> "For the Salvation Army," *New York Times*, February 20, 1942, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1942/02/20/85022178.html?pageNumber=16>.

programs and new equipment in 1945.<sup>61</sup> Another group was the YMCA. In 1930, the *New York Times* reported it was erecting four new buildings.<sup>62</sup> It also dedicated a branch for African Americans.<sup>63</sup> However by 1935, the YMCA reported its worst year among youth, discouraged by the Depression at home and war in Europe.<sup>64</sup> Only a little earlier, it had a meeting of international members. There was talk globally of a clash of faiths and that this also affected youth.<sup>65</sup> While the Salvation Army and the YMCA were both Christian organizations, the *New York Times* promoted the non-religious organization Goodwill as well.<sup>66</sup> The newspaper's reporting varied from announcing the new head of the organization to an appeal for the handicapped to another for facilities for the disabled where the handicapped would be paid to work.<sup>67</sup> While there were charities both religious and non-religious, there is no denying the Roosevelt administration took some of the leadership mantle traditionally occupied in people's lives by their church.

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<sup>61</sup> "Salvationists Ask Fund," *New York Times*, December 22, 1945, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/12/22/305215342.html?pageNumber=17>.

<sup>62</sup> "Y.M.C.A. to Erect 4 Buildings in 1930," *New York Times*, January 19, 1930, <https://www.nytimes.com/1930/01/19/archives/ymca-to-erect-4-buildings-in-1930-structures-to-cost-4000000.html>.

<sup>63</sup> "Y.M.C.A. Dedicates Its Negro Branch," *New York Times*, January 2, 1933, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/01/02/99197867.html?pageNumber=25>.

<sup>64</sup> "Youth Had Its 'Worst Year' in 1934 Y.M.C.A. Reports, Citing 'Stark Decay'," *New York Times*, January 20, 1935, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1935/01/20/93442798.html?pageNumber=71>.

<sup>65</sup> "Sets Y.M.C.A. New Task," *New York Times*, May 15, 1934, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1934/05/15/93627673.html?pageNumber=3>.

<sup>66</sup> "Clothing for Relief a Continuing Need," *New York Times*, December 11, 1943, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1943/12/11/85140226.html?pageNumber=28>.

<sup>67</sup> "Attorney Elected Head of Goodwill Industries," *New York Times*, February 4, 1943, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1943/02/04/85082592.html?pageNumber=25>; "Appeal for Handicapped," *New York Times*, October 25, 1944, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1944/10/25/86732934.html?pageNumber=26>; "Facilities for Disabled," *New York Times*, November 30, 1944, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1944/11/30/86887282.html?pageNumber=6>.

## **Religion Anticipating War**

As the Great Depression persisted, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America engaged in a number of activities. Churches were not aloof to economic crisis. It held an interracial conference in New Jersey in 1937.<sup>68</sup> It speculated on praying for peace and debating government policies in 1938. Namely, it argued that the United States should work to ease economic tensions and continue with its work stabilizing currencies. Also, it should join the League of Nations.<sup>69</sup> These opinions were well ahead of American public opinion which was still isolationist at the time. Later in 1940, it handled a \$125,000 grant from the United Jewish Appeal, addressed President Roosevelt's appointment of an envoy to the Vatican, inquired about a universal Christian flag, and attended other business.<sup>70</sup> Churches were still active during the Great Depression but there was a limit to how much they could do.

As time passed, events in Europe drew increasing attention from Americans, yet another focus competing with religion. Congress passed the Neutrality Act of 1937. It allowed cash and carry trade only where foreigners paid for American goods at the port and brought them back in their own vessels. It extended an arms embargo and a ban on loans. Also, Americans were forbidden to sail on belligerent ships, and the president was given the discretion to prohibit

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<sup>68</sup> "The Berkeley-Carteret Hotel," October 14-15, 1937, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America—Archives, NCC RG 18, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA, [https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A6746?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=f59890bbe118be5b557c&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=16](https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A6746?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=f59890bbe118be5b557c&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=16).

<sup>69</sup> "The churches and the international crisis, 1938," 1938, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America—Archives, NCC RG 18, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA, [https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A132209?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=f59890bbe118be5b557c&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=9#page/5/mode/1up](https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A132209?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=f59890bbe118be5b557c&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=9#page/5/mode/1up).

<sup>70</sup> "Correspondence primarily between George A., Buttrick and Samuel McCrea Cavert, 1940," 1940, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America—Archives, NCC RG 18, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA, [https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A116028?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=f59890bbe118be5b557c&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=13#page/12/mode/1up](https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A116028?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=f59890bbe118be5b557c&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=13#page/12/mode/1up).

exports to belligerent powers. The idea behind this bill was to keep America out of foreign entanglements and to avoid being pulled into war. This principle was put to the test when on December 12, 1937, Japan attacked a U.S. ship and three oil tankers. On December 24, Japan apologized, pledging to cover the costs and removing the naval commander who ordered the attack.<sup>71</sup> In March 1939, Germany annexed Czechoslovakia. President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Adolf Hitler, the leader of Germany, asking him to swear against any further military conquest for a decade or two. Hitler launched a blistering attack on Roosevelt that offended most Americans.

As events built up with Kristallnacht and then Germany's invasion of Poland which triggered Britain and France to declare war, American public opinion swung then settled on wait-and-see isolationism.<sup>72</sup> War would give preachers something new on which to lecture. America braced itself for war, and it increased production. In 1940, Congress established the Defense Plant Corporation. It spent billions of dollars building war production facilities. \$175 billion was spent on war contracts from 1940 to 1944. Gross National Product, adjusted for inflation, increased by two-thirds from 1939 to 1944. Unemployment fell from 15 percent in 1940 to 1 percent in 1944.<sup>73</sup> World War II triggered a change in economics and politics but the religious state of affairs took longer to change.

While Roosevelt mostly focused on the business of the presidency, he did on occasion mention religion. In his 1941 State of the Union address, he delivered what is known as the Four Freedoms. These are freedom of speech and expression, "freedom of every person to worship

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<sup>71</sup> Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 225, 228-229.

<sup>72</sup> James Lacey, *The Washington War: FDR's Inner Circle and the Politics of Power That Won World War II* (New York: Bantam Books, 2019), location 793-799, 913, 933.

<sup>73</sup> John W. Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front*, 2nd ed., Kindle ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 365, 429, 553.

God in his own way,” freedom from want, and freedom from fear of military aggression.<sup>74</sup> He specified these should exist everywhere in the world. This demonstrated both the emerging role of the United States as a global power and how politics, economics, and religion all competed for priority and mixed. Praising monotheism remained in the repertoire of politicians but religion was not Roosevelt’s overriding focus. In this speech, the spread of democracy was.

Once World War II began, churches took a variety of positions on it. There was no consensus over the causes of the war or what America and churches should do. The editors of *Fortune* in January 1940 expressed disillusionment over this. Some advocated pacifism, like the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. It organized a National Peace Conference with the peace organization of nearly all Protestant denominations. It supported the Neutrality Acts and avoiding taking the side of any country. There was lingering disillusionment over World War I which prompted many Americans toward a stance of isolationism. In fact, virtually every Protestant denomination in America passed resolutions in the 1930s naming war as a sin. Some went on the record in support of conscientious objectors.<sup>75</sup> In all, during World War II there were 11,887 conscientious objectors. Of note, only 135 were Catholic. Catholics and Lutherans were the most militant in the United States during this period. Conscientious objectors could point to the just war theory or pacifist traditions. However, Catholics as a whole opposed conscription. Criticisms included that each person should be allowed to choose a vocation, conscience should prevail over military duty, peacetime conscription indicated a war of aggression, and a war would not necessarily bring peace. There were also concerns that a

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<sup>74</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “1941 State of the Union Address ‘The Four Freedoms’ (6 January 1941),” *Voices of Democracy*, accessed November 4, 2021, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/fdr-the-four-freedoms-speech-text/>.

<sup>75</sup> Ray H. Abrams, “The Churches and the Clergy in World War II,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 256 (1948): 111-112.

conscription law would rope in religious officials and students in training.<sup>76</sup> In 1940, attitudes shifted. Some influential clergy issued a manifesto calling for the nation to devote resources to the Allies. Similar statements followed. After Pearl Harbor, there was no longer division. Religious leaders accepted war. Also, they did not succumb to hysteria but remained calm. Chaplains joined the army and the navy. However, there was still hope for a just and lasting peace and a federation of nations.<sup>77</sup>

One leading theological liberal, Reinhold Niebuhr, was particularly vocal on the subject of war. He is an example of how religious figures returned to the national stage with World War II. When Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, he rejected inaction because he believed a nation could not love another enough to save it. Hence justice was required. He supported coercion without military force via an economic embargo and boycott of Japanese products. Niebuhr was an early proponent of realism.<sup>78</sup> He saw life as a clash of interests and as a quest for power. A balance of powers was key. He incorporated some Christian doctrine, namely that humans were sinful. Without balancing powers, tyranny would emerge in a society. Niebuhr's concern over fascism was prescient. Like many Americans, he inched towards war, coming to terms with rearmament in 1939 and war after Pearl Harbor. On the other hand, he moved back to the mainstream in other respects, shifting his support from socialism to the New Deal and changing from a proponent of Marxism to a critic. Niebuhr became very influential, being read by George Kennan and many others. He laid the grounds for the realist perspective.<sup>79</sup> Of Niebuhr, one sees

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<sup>76</sup> Patricia McNeal, "Catholic Conscientious Objection during World War II," *The Catholic Historical Review* 61, No. 2 (1975): 222-225.

<sup>77</sup> Abrams, "The Churches and the Clergy in World War II," 113-114, 116, 118.

<sup>78</sup> William C. Inboden, "The Prophetic Conflict: Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and World War II," *Diplomatic History* 38, No. 1 (2014): 49-50, 53.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-57.

many aspects. He was a man somewhat removed from traditional Christianity, applying what he retained to war and foreign policy. He was an American like any other, holding particular political views and then shifting with the nation towards war. He is an example of politics shaping the religious instead of the other way around.

Churches were also international advocates of peace. The Federal (or World) Council of Churches published a pamphlet in 1943 encouraging readers to spread Christianity at the peace table. At church bookstores, instead of Bible study materials and evangelical tracts, there were internationalist bestsellers on peace and global unity. In fact, the Roosevelt administration hoped to mobilize churches as an internationalist bloc. And the churches relished proximity to power, desiring to shape the world on Christian principles. The Council established a Commission on a Just and Durable Peace with Republican politician John Foster Dulles as chair in 1940. It involved many major figures.<sup>80</sup>

The commission published a booklet entitled *A Just and Durable Peace* with peace-planning pronouncements from the Church of England and Catholic and Protestant church leaders. Churches had not lost scale even though they had lost influence and membership. It criticized nationalism and advocated international solidarity over national sovereignty. In 1942, the commission developed a “Statement of Guiding Principles” which included calls for economic interdependence, free trade, and shared access to resources. In addition, it promoted disarmament, anticolonialism, and universal human rights. It commented the United States might have a large role to play in establishing a moral order. Christians were regarded as an electorate to support American internationalism.<sup>81</sup> As World War II went on, liberal Christians developed

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<sup>80</sup> Michael G. Thompson, *For God and Globe: Christian Internationalism in the United States between the Great War and the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 167-170.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-174.

an internationalist vision that mixed Christian principles with politics.

### War Chaplains

Another religious development during World War II was the influx of chaplains. There were church meetings within the military. Mormons photographed their meetings. The army documented all activities. Church meetings could be held at a nearby chapel or even a field if a building was not available.<sup>82</sup> Chaplains provided religious services, acted as counselors, visited servicemen in hospitals, and managed morale. They guarded against gambling, indecent entertainment and literature, alcohol consumption, and sexual activity. One chaplain was responsible for 1,200 men. On alcohol some were more lenient, depending upon their denomination. Catholic chaplains were more permissive than Methodists. After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, alcohol was displayed in Hollywood movies without stigma and magazines featured lucrative alcohol ads. Opposition to alcohol came from church hierarchies as opposed to congregations. However, roughly 35 percent of Americans still supported Prohibition. They lobbied unsuccessfully to prevent the sale and supply of alcohol to soldiers. Soldiers were able to buy beer during leisure hours at post exchanges and clubs. Hard liquor was prohibited.<sup>83</sup>

The Chief of Chaplains' Office stated that restricting soldiers off-base would trample on their rights as citizens. This was an example of church representatives putting American norms before church norms. Per one survey, the majority of soldiers did not drink in the evening. The Office of War Information found that troops did not drink excessively and Army officers

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<sup>82</sup> Robert C. Freeman, Dennis A. Wright, and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, "Photographs of Church Meetings among the U.S. Military in World War II," *Brigham Young University Studies* 41, No. 1 (2002): 147, 151.

<sup>83</sup> Jenel Virden, "Warm Beer and Cold Canons: US Army Chaplains and Alcohol Consumption in World War II," *Journal of American Studies* 48, No. 1 (2014): 80, 82-84.

preferred wet communities to dry ones.<sup>84</sup> Whereas before the 1920s, Prohibition was a national cause supported by religious leaders of multiple stripes, by World War II, some chaplains evaded the issue, focusing on providing moral support and services.

Jews also served during World War II and had chaplains, indicating the acceptance of religious pluralism in America by this point. However, at the outbreak of war, there were no rabbis as chaplains. Instead, the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB) addressed religious needs, providing civilian rabbis. With World War II, this group organized a Committee on Army and Navy Religious Activities (CANRA) with rabbis of different levels of observance. CANRA established liturgy and literature for Jewish servicemen and reached out to rabbis to serve as chaplains. By September 1945, there were nearly 300 rabbis as chaplains as compared with 26 in World War I. Half were Reform, under a quarter were Orthodox, and the rest were Conservative. Reform rabbis became more traditional, Orthodox rabbis loosened their observance, and Conservative practice expanded.<sup>85</sup> As Jews were more scattered, their chaplains had to cover much ground and hold multiple services in different locations as much as 10 or 15 miles apart. The JWB helped with transportation. Jewish chaplains also made contact with Jewish communities in Europe, helping to rebuild them. They brought food, they organized schools, and they made lists of survivors.<sup>86</sup> World War II was a religious opportunity for those who accepted the call to serve.

Chaplains could be caught in the heat of battle. They played an important role for American morale. In one case, four chaplains were caught on a ship being pursued by a Nazi U-

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 85-86.

<sup>85</sup> Philip S. Bernstein, "Jewish Chaplains in World War II," *The American Jewish Year Book* 47 (1945): 173-174.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 175-176.

boat. They were trained at an Army Chaplain School which sometimes relocated across America. They were taught marching drills so they would be able to survive on the front lines alongside enlisted men. One was in fact a World War I veteran who had taken on preaching afterwards. Another went to a non-Orthodox rabbinical school during the Great Depression. He managed this through a Jewish group's scholarship. The third went to a divinity school after college. He saw becoming chaplain as doing his part in a necessary war. The last set his sights on joining the clergy while still in adolescence.<sup>87</sup> They all assembled in New York and boarded the SS *Dorchester* for Greenland. As the soldiers came, they smiled and occasionally said "Welcome aboard!" to the most timid looking. One detail that stood out was a Protestant, a Jew, and two Catholics standing next to each other. Normally, different religions would not have much to do with one another. The ship was formerly used for sightseeing but became worn and rusted under military use. It had broken down in the middle of the ocean before.<sup>88</sup> The chaplains comforted those to whom they spoke about having a successful voyage. Later, when the ship was struck by a U-boat, the chaplains helped the soldiers over the edge of the ship. The others gave up their life jackets. Of an estimated 904 on board, 678 died from hypothermia or drowning.<sup>89</sup> While in an atypical, tragic scenario, the chaplains acted heroically and sacrificed themselves to save as many others as they could. Chaplains were still exposed to the risks of war, like soldiers, and in a time of panic, four acted admirably enough to have a book written.

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<sup>87</sup> Steven T. Collis, *The Immortals* (Salt Lake City, UT: Shadow Mountain, 2021), 14-16, 18, 29, 74, 78, 86, 125-128, 130.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-155.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-187, 190, 197, 204, 217.

## Religion, Education, and Missions

Yet another religious element during World War II was religious higher education. At the time of Pearl Harbor, George Pepperdine College (now Pepperdine University) was in the first term of its fifth year. It drew students from Churches of Christ which had helped to more than double its first-year student population up to 357 in Fall 1941. With the onset of war, enrollment declined and war-related activities became prominent on campus. The college evaluated itself, as the Churches of Christ had dropped its formerly pacifist stance. Also, over 400 students enlisted in the military.<sup>90</sup> There were students who declared themselves as conscientious objectors. Over the United States' involvement in the war, 200 Church of Christ members worked as Civilians for Public Service on public service projects without pay. They lived in camps formerly occupied by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Students received campus newspapers with a column on international affairs, reflecting the shift in focus of the Church of Christ from local to global events. The student author of this column, Ray Simpson, also criticized segregation within the denomination and the lower status of African American members, comparing this with aspects of Nazism. In November 1942, there was an editorial criticizing isolationism.<sup>91</sup> Another article asked students if they thought it was selfish to pursue a degree in wartime. In an opening address for the 1943 to 1944 school year, the president of Pepperdine, Hugh Tiner, assured students that getting an education was a bedrock of democracy and would prepare them to help rebuild the world after war. On campus, there were first aid

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<sup>90</sup> Loretta Hunnicutt, "Staying 'On the Beam': Pepperdine College During World War II," in *Denominational Higher Education during World War II*, Kindle ed., ed. John J. Laukaitis (Chicago: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), location 334-361.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, location 455-488.

courses by the Red Cross, defense committees, and a book drive for soldiers.<sup>92</sup> In short, America's involvement in World War II transformed religious colleges' campus like Pepperdine, spurring new discussions and changes in political stances.

One of the darker events of World War II was America's internment of Japanese Americans on the basis of nationality. During it, missionaries built pews and altars, organized donations, arranged for the transport of supplies, and found housing in nearby towns. To enter internment camps required an entry pass secured from a camp administrator. There was a policy that banned religious services that propagandized or incited incarcerates, leaving religion practice in the discretion of administrators. They allowed idolatry as well as Christianity. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) had each religious group choose leaders, which was troubling to Catholics accustomed to having a clergy assigned to them.<sup>93</sup> It did not provide chaplains, so they needed to be paid from outside sources. Housing could be difficult. Authorities banned proselytization in camps on the ground of preserving a separation of church and state. Catholics in particular were unhappy with this and the inability to raise parochial schools for themselves. Often there was no church building while schools were being built. Congregations would use shared spaces and remove their equipment after each meeting. There were not private chambers for study, personal prayer, and pastoral counseling. In 1943, camp administrators allocated two apartments per religion. Services in this setting were by nature ecumenical, and some pastors tried to further unifying efforts. Parishioners defined a confession of faith to delineate church members. As mainline Protestants had the greatest numbers, they influenced worship practices

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., location 532, 554-575.

<sup>93</sup> Anne M. Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice, and the Japanese American Incarceration during World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 98-100.

accordingly.<sup>94</sup> Japanese internment did not separate Christians from Christianity.

The religious experienced adversities outside of America as well. Around the time of World War II, there was a flurry of missionary work. America taking a new global role renewed religious energies. American missionary Darlene Deibler Rose was with her husband in New Guinea when they were captured by the Japanese. They arrived in 1938. Rose was assigned to teach Sunday school and church history in Indonesian. Many of her students never had held a pencil before or had a schedule. During the break from school, the missionaries were informed of the beginning of World War II by a Dutch patrol officer. In October, a German freighter flying a swastika came to port. A few months later, Rose's husband Russell attempted to convince a local chieftain that he and company were not spirit people. Some of the chieftain's men decided to ambush another party that was coming, reasoning if they could kill them, the outsiders were not spirits. Some were killed in the skirmish.<sup>95</sup> Rose, her husband, and other conducted missionary activity for a couple years. Then in January 1942, months after Pearl Harbor, they learned Japan had conquered the Philippines. Against Dutch encouragement to evacuate, the missionaries decided to stay. The ship they would have taken was sunk three days later.

In March, the Japanese arrived and the Roses and company were captured. Rose was separated from her husband and kept in internment for four years. The natives she and others had evangelized brought them food to keep them from starving until their gardens grew. Also early on, one missionary discussed places in the region to go to next after the war. Rose led a nightly reading of the Bible. When they were moved to barracks, each one had a daily work quota. Duties ranged from the kitchen to the garden to felling trees, working on roads, raising animals,

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 102-103, 106-107, 110-112.

<sup>95</sup> Darlene Deibler Rose, *Evidence Not Seen: A Woman's Miraculous Faith in the Jungles of World War II* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 8-9, 20, 22-23.

hospital duty, and more. Eventually Rose found out her husband had died of illness in the men's camp. Only with Japan's signing of the Potsdam Declaration for an unconditional surrender was Rose freed.<sup>96</sup> Missionary work during World War II involved not only sacrifice but also risk. This was a serious tradeoff to Americans' efforts to evangelize in a war-torn world.

After the war, the new president Harry Truman gave a speech about religion in America. He declared it "a deeply religious Nation from its earliest beginnings." He spoke to America's freedom of worship and national motto, "In God We Trust." He saw faith as the strength America needed on its path forward. He said religion should not be taken for granted but rather practiced daily.<sup>97</sup> Along those lines, Truman also released a statement recognizing Israel. He noted the reality of the partition and the functioning of Jewish government. The United States should take advantage of this, he believed. Recognizing Israel would return American prestige.<sup>98</sup> The Great Depression and World War II did not extinguish American faith, but it was not until America recovered economically that the nation's spiritual life began to revitalize. As mentioned, Pentecostals grew during the Depression and the war was a new area of activity for churches. However, it was noted that economic adversity hurt religious attendance. Religious attendance was higher during the boom years after World War II than before or during it.<sup>99</sup> The Depression was not so bleak that religion practically died, but the missionary efforts described were the first indications of religion regaining strength after tough times.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 40-41, 43, 45, 47-48, 56, 69-70, 109.

<sup>97</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Radio Address as Part of the Program 'Religion in American Life,'" The American Presidency Project, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-part-the-program-religion-american-life>.

<sup>98</sup> "Memo supporting a Statement by Truman recognizing Israel, May 9, 1948," Harry S. Truman Library Museum, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/memo-supporting-statement-truman-recognizing-israel?documentid=NA&pagenumber=1>.

<sup>99</sup> Robert Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010), 83.

There were yet more evangelical efforts after World War II. American religion took after the country's new global role. In 1946, Billy Graham and five associates came to Europe to preach to the military. This was followed by invitations to preach worldwide to stir revivals in various areas. They came under the impression that Europe had experienced spiritual devastation and needed help to solve its problems. For example, Nazism, they believed, was the product of anti-Christian philosophy and higher criticism in German universities. This left a whole population in need of spiritual guidance. Preachers could organize their activities under the National Association of Evangelicals, made up of traditional Christians critical of liberal mainline Protestant denominations that they attributed as the cause of war. In particular, they were concerned about the liberal World Council of Churches. As an international organization with global ambitions, they apprehended the potential for a global liberal church that would distort doctrine. This fear served as an impetus to missionary activity.<sup>100</sup> As a result, there were competing missionary organizations. For success, groups had to tamp down their Americanism and make headway with churches. Some were established, state-supported churches unfamiliar with evangelicalism. Others were small and missionary but led by strong personalities that distrusted outsiders. Amid the emerging threat of communism and in poverty after the war, churches could accept evangelical resources which often took the form of translated literature and tracts.<sup>101</sup> World War II and international theological liberalism motivated evangelicals to spread their reach beyond America and provide support amid poverty, unlike when America faced the Depression.

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<sup>100</sup> Hans Krabbendam, "Opening a Market for Missions: American Evangelicals and the Re-Christianization of Europe, 1945-1985," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 59, No. 2 (2014): 155-157.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-160.

## **Religion, the Great Depression, and World War II**

The Great Depression was a time of hardship. Early government policies failed. Later ones took a while to work fully. In the meantime, people were left with a long-lasting economic crisis unlike anything past generations had experienced. Families were tested financially and spiritually. Work was hard to find. Evangelicals continued Gospel efforts but received less in money and attendance. Some considered the divine message behind the crisis. Religion could be a comfort and a community for those who participated, but a good number could not wrap their heads around why God allowed such suffering. Some ministers shifted gears, taking on a socioeconomic agenda. Others still tried to appeal amidst adversity. Pentecostals grew in numbers. Catholics organized for government support and advocacy. Jews made inroads with the Roosevelt administration. Meanwhile the government devised a number of programs to put people to work. Some laws made a big impact on workers' rights. Also, charitable organizations did what they could. Religious activity did not cease during the Great Depression but much was going on that drew away from it.

World War II was a time of international engagement and national economic recovery. At first America was isolationist and content to watch events in Europe from afar. Only as Germany became more threatening did it offer support through money and weapons. At the same time, the United States activated its defense industry, offering many jobs. There was concern that businesses would exploit the war and that getting involved would be a mistake like how World War I was viewed. However, the internationalist perspective prevailed and people were better off for it. With the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan, the United States formally entered the war. The attack could be considered a miscalculation by Japan, as Germany was doing well in Europe without American intervention and Japan proved weaker than the United States. Amidst this,

there were some religious developments but they proceeded in terms of these larger events. Churches took a variety of positions on the war at first and were an influential block. Some found it necessary to intervene to stop tyranny and the attack on Pearl Harbor pushed most into this camp. Other religious people had an eye toward international peace, establishing principles for economic interdependence, free trade, and human rights. Perhaps the greatest religious development during World War II was the presence of chaplains. They tried to promote moral behavior, served as counselors, and helped with morale. In times of crisis, chaplains could be composed and bring soldiers to their senses. Even with the threat of the Nazis, Jews served as chaplains, helping Jewish communities in Europe among other tasks. Even amidst persecution, whether in Japanese internment camps in America or ones abroad for Americans and other national military opponents, Christianity could be found. Leaders certainly took steps after the war to promote religion by supporting the newly established government of Israel and evangelizing in war-torn Europe. The post-war period and the Cold War marked a new page for American religion. Instead of being overshadowed, it became a landmark of society until faced with domestic resistance.

### Chapter 3

#### Religious Recovery, Diversity, and Conservative Survival

The 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s constitute major periods of American religious history. They echoed religious changes, from the rise of religious attendance in the 1950s to the splintering of mainline Protestant attendance in the 1970s, from the increasing emphasis on God in the 1950s to religiously backed civil rights efforts in the 1960s to early signs of religious politicization over social issues in the 1970s. There are many threads to cover, from the Youth for Christ movement and Billy Graham to American jurisprudence on religion in schools to Dr. Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and so on. This chapter examines the plethora of religious developments noting how, by and large, only the conservative denominations prospered by the 1970s. It is demonstrated that the foundations of religion, which were weakened by the Great Depression era, brought a period of major change in religious practice, especially in the following generation of youth. The turning point in American religion has been covered. Now the beginning of its effects are explored.

With the collapse of the Axis powers, America engaged in a struggle with the Soviet Union. This opponent was communist and decidedly unreligious. In the uncertainty of a new global order with America as one of the major two powers, political leaders had a commitment not only to the spread of capitalism abroad. America was a beacon of Western civilization, leading the charge in religion. However, another side to this was conformity. When the Russians gained atomic weaponry, China became communist, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of selling atomic secrets to the Soviets, not fitting in smacked of treachery and communism. When *Christian Century* questioned why President Eisenhower proposed to terminate the citizenship of anyone advocating the overthrow of the United States government,

angry readers wrote to the staff, one claiming they were not Christian. With the Red Scare came an uptick in church attendance. 79 percent of Americans claimed membership at a church and 96 percent said they believed in God.<sup>1</sup> Eisenhower believed God took a direct interest in America and democracy was the purest translation of faith into politics. However, he struggled to articulate religious beliefs beyond honesty, fairness, and service. In this context, the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization, proposed adding “under God” to the country’s pledge of allegiance to a New York congressman, Edmund Radwan. A month later, without knowledge of this effort, Congressman Louis Rabault of Michigan made the same proposal. He had sponsored a bill for a postal service cancellation mark with the motto “In God We Trust” too. The idea of measures like these were to counter communism with expressions of monotheistic belief. While Christianity played an influential role throughout American history, contributing to the nation’s sense of identity, America was not a religious state. It was a relatively religious people. When the phrase “under God” was adopted, a few worried that it compromised His sacred name.<sup>2</sup> However, in a statement, President Eisenhower said the phrase represented “the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty.” It provided an opportunity for youth each morning to contemplate on the country’s meaning. Religious faith countered materialism and violence in the world.<sup>3</sup> In all, the rise of atheist enemies after World War II prompted a counter-response in America.

World leaders spoke of a spiritual wall. Winston Churchill mentioned an iron curtain.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Canipe, “Under God and Anti-Communist: How the Pledge of Allegiance Got Religion in Cold War America,” *Journal of Church and State* 45, No. 2 (2003): 311-313.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 314-315, 319.

<sup>3</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill to Include the Words ‘Under God’ in the Pledge to the Flag,” The American Presidency Project, accessed March 6, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-upon-signing-bill-include-the-words-under-god-the-pledge-the-flag>.

President Truman spoke of the need for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to unite against gathering forces. The American government used the rhetoric of good versus evil, freedom against enslavement, and God-inspired, God-fearing democracy as opposed to communist tyranny. In fact, Truman, a faithful Baptist, believed God elevated him to the presidency to confront the Soviet Union. George Kennan warned that Russia would adapt its Orthodox Church to advance communism.<sup>4</sup> In 1947, the CIA sent millions to Catholic Action, the political arm of the Vatican, to combat communists in the Italian elections. The private, high-level government document NSC 68 articulated that the Soviets had a faith antithetical to Americans and sought to rule the world. Under Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles courted prominent American religious leaders to support the president's foreign policy. He used moralistic rhetoric at the young United Nations and had clergymen meet with foreign dignitaries. In his 1952 campaign, Eisenhower characterized the Cold War as a holy battle. In his inaugural address, Eisenhower gave a prayer, the first time for a president in American history. He reached out to Muslim leaders to ally against godless communism. The CIA planned to devote funds and arms to Arab leaders.<sup>5</sup> Religion became a key factor in American 1950s foreign policy.

Catholics were particularly anti-communist in the West's struggle against an atheist Soviet Union. Edmund A. Walsh was the leading Catholic for a national security state. In 1919, at age 33, he founded Georgetown's School of Foreign Service, the first for diplomatic training in the country. Three years later, he was appointed to direct papal relief in the Soviet Union. He was a consultant for the Nuremberg trials, interrogating General Karl Haushofer, Germany's

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<sup>4</sup> James C. Wallace, "A Religious War?: The Cold War and Religion," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, No. 3 (2013): 162-163, 165.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-168.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick J. McNamara, "'The Argument of Strength Justly and Righteously Employed': Edmund A. Walsh, Catholic Anticommunism, and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1952," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22, No. 4 (2004): 57-58.

leading geopolitical authority.<sup>6</sup> It was while he was in Russia that he noticed American Protestant indifference to the religious plight there. During this time, he became a committed anti-communist. When he returned to the United States, Walsh embarked on a public awareness campaign, publishing four books, dozens of articles, and nearly 2,000 lectures on Soviet communism over 30 years. He fought against diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union. It was he who emphasized to others at New York's Economic Club in March 1925 that communism was meant as a worldwide program which disregarded international and divine law.<sup>7</sup> His remarks proved prescient decades later with the start of the Cold War. Russia would not simply allow democracy and self-governance in the Eastern European countries it now occupied. Meanwhile, it advertised its communist program to nations around the world, seeking ideological allies against the United States. With the Cold War, geopolitics became the focus of American policymakers and Walsh emphasized the new geopolitics to them. He knew the Soviet Union would be an antagonistic power. Fortunately for Walsh, Truman was less conciliatory to it than Roosevelt. He saw the Truman Doctrine, pledging to contain communism, as a turning point in United States policy.<sup>8</sup> In all, with the looming threat of communism, some religious leaders stepped into the public sphere.

### **Religious Renewal**

President Eisenhower is credited with helping to revive American religion in the 1950s. He sought to direct the nation along a spiritual crusade. Ironically, he was not particularly religious while in the military, but he took on church attendance while in public office. He

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

thought doing so was right for the country. Eisenhower believed religious faith was an American cornerstone. Similarly, he thought the country was becoming too secular. He defended the time he spent with evangelist Billy Graham. One scholar noted Eisenhower's appeal came from representing stably traditional American virtues and values.<sup>9</sup> Repeatedly in his statements Eisenhower said that God stood over America, a core tenet of non-sectarian civil religion. He was careful not to make claims about the will of God. Eisenhower knew it was necessary to seek divine aid to discern right from wrong clearly. He saw America's political strength as tied to its religious faith. He wanted the history of religion to be taught in public schools. Core to him was that the individual was meaningful and significant, born in God's image. Anti-communism meant a crusade for human rights. Self-government by free men and women was God's design. In this vein, Eisenhower refused to intervene in the colony of French Indochina. Likewise, he did not wish to infringe upon other nations during the Suez Canal crisis. He desired to protect the rights of all. Like Psalm 34, Eisenhower sought and pursued peace. He saw religiosity as instrumental to this.<sup>10</sup> Eisenhower emphasized the importance of religion to the country and religious attendance became the norm during his two terms.

Originally associated with the Youth for Christ movement, Billy Graham branched out on his own in the 1950s, becoming a spiritual advisor to the powerful and an evangelist to the masses. He saw the world as evil and hostile to humanity based on fundamentalist scriptural views. World peace and prosperity would only come after the second coming of a messiah, per his premillennialist views. Graham held out hope in mass conversions to Christian practice.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> James David Fairbanks, "Religious Dimensions of Presidential Leadership: The Case of Dwight Eisenhower," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 12, No. 2 (1982): 261.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-265.

<sup>11</sup> William D. Apel, "The Lost World of Billy Graham," *Review of Religious Research* 20, No. 2 (1979): 138, 140-141.

In his sermons, he asked the audience to choose Jesus and commit to Christianity. At the same time, he stated the best would come when Christians saw their savior return. He varied in his message of when he believed this would come, ultimately leaving it to God. However, he advocated for a spiritual revival. He did this not only in the 1950s but also in the 1960s and 1970s. It was only with Watergate that he stopped this initiative.<sup>12</sup>

Graham's sermons were not stereotypical in many ways. One focused on how to live a Christian life. It took place at Madison Square Garden. A choir sang at the beginning. Twelve minutes into the video, Graham took the podium. He gave an opening prayer. Then he commented that he did not expect his revival still to be going on at this point. He thanked God for the crowds, the letters, and the telephone calls. He stated his expectation that attendance will drop in August but also his conviction that God will be there. He went to a passage from the Gospels. Then he gave the example of a woman butchering Beethoven because she did not know how to play the piano. This is a metaphor, he explained, for people who would like to live Christian. Often they do not know how. He said one can go to church and live a decent life but these do not make one a Christian. He continued, "There are thousands of people in America tonight that think they're Christian but in actuality they are not Christians... They have never been reborn again. They have never received Christ into their hearts and if they died, they would not go to heaven." He defined a Christian as someone who has had a personal encounter with Jesus and has accepted him as one's savior and lord. Then one must have a definite change in one's life, loving God and putting Him first, loving one's neighbor as oneself.<sup>13</sup> His message was blunt but straightforward. Presumably it was relevant to the thousands who came to hear Graham

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 142-143, 147.

<sup>13</sup> "1957 Billy Graham How to live the Christian Life-Full," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, posted on December 14, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ei\\_eIL08vbs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ei_eIL08vbs).

speak.

Graham held another event at Yankee Stadium. It was the largest evangelistic meeting in American history as of 1957: over 100,000 attended. There were even people outside the stadium by loudspeakers. Graham provided an introduction for then-Vice President Nixon. Graham thanked him and spoke highly of him, citing Nixon's Christian upbringing. Nixon offered Eisenhower's best wishes and said the president wished his schedule would allow him to be there. Nixon drew attention to what the meeting meant and represented. He alluded to American settlers at Jamestown 350 years from then and the *Mayflower* with Pilgrims. He noted America's preeminence and cited its bountiful resources. However, he said, not all nations in such circumstances have enjoyed America's progress. He pointed out the country's liberty, individual opportunity, and "deep and abiding faith in God." Then he thanked the thousand responsible for putting this event together.

Graham began speaking a few minutes later. He asked for the audience not to move about or whisper but give their absolute attention. He said people could find a host of needs by surrendering themselves to Jesus. Then he prayed for this. He credited Jesus for making the event come together on such scale. Next, he went to Exodus and asked who was on God's side? In Joshua, he read Joshua's exhortation to choose to serve God or idols and the people's response that they would serve God. He told his audience to make such a choice respecting Jesus or secularism and materialism. He referenced Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great, neither of whom were monotheist.<sup>14</sup> To this point, Graham's talk is not dense and is oriented towards religious beginners. Notably, he repeatedly emphasized Jesus over directing attention to God. He had a traditionally Christian focus and his task was garnering people's commitments to

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<sup>14</sup> "Billy Graham's 1957 New York Crusade Sermon at Yankee Stadium," Billy Graham Classics, posted on July 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aZoqIwHsdM>.

Christianity and Jesus. This would be a common theme in many of his performances.

Another prominent clergy in the 1950s was Edward L. R. Elson. He was the eldest of nine children and felt a calling to the ministry in high school, opting for that over military service. As a young minister, he went to Europe on a seminar and witnessed Nazi Germany firsthand. He ended up enlisting with the United States as a reserve chaplain in 1939. When he was called to active duty in 1941, he resigned his post with a California congregation. He went through army chaplain training, baptized children, and made religious statements to units.<sup>15</sup> By 1942, he held responsibilities over the chaplains of 11 western states before being sent to Europe in late 1944. His responsibilities changed from paperwork to ministering. He was present at the capture of the Landsberg and Dachau concentration camps and conducted interviews with imprisoned clergy. Many of them had been interned for assisting Jews or dissenting against Nazi policies. After the war, he led a prominent Presbyterian church in Washington, D.C., preaching to government officials. Later on, from 1969 to 1981, he served as Chaplain to the United States Senate. In the course of time, he published many books and gave numerous sermons.<sup>16</sup> One was entitled *America's Spiritual Recovery*. It joined a series of religious books published in 1954 that proved to be popular. Elson focused on the spiritual renaissance ongoing at the time of his writing.<sup>17</sup> Elson was one of a generation of preachers who thrived during the Eisenhower years.

Among this wave of ministers was a broader Youth for Christ movement. The impact of this movement could be felt on a local football team where, after winning the state championship, 16 players who were involved with Youth for Christ detailed their relationships

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<sup>15</sup> "Chaplain Edward L. R. Elson," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) 82, No. 2 (2004): 128-130.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132.

<sup>17</sup> Caspar Nannes, "Books That Reflect Spiritual Renaissance in America," *Evening Star*, December 5, 1954, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1954-12-05/ed-1/seq-250/>.

with Jesus.<sup>18</sup> One particular triumph of Youth for Christ was a Memorial Day rally attended by 65,000 in Chicago. A notable feature of this movement was it met outside of churches. Meetings were led by young and often nonordained workers. The organization rose with the end of World War II. It held big events not affiliated with any particular denomination. There were radio broadcasts with brief testimonials, short sermons to youth, music, and a focus on salvation. However, there were not franchises. Rather, Youth for Christ was a network of young men with a common concern for religious life who exchanged ideas and strategies. Notably, women did not play much of a role in the organization or as targets of programming. It received a boost from William Randolph Hearst's papers along with *American Magazine*, *Colliers*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*.<sup>19</sup> Key leaders were Reverend Lloyd T. Bryant, Percy Crawford, Jack Wyrzten, Jim Rayburn, and Torrey Johnson. They preached to audiences in different regions. Youth for Christ also established over 2,000 high school clubs, often led by volunteers. The organization was also aligned with American aims in the Cold War, with members who had served in the military.<sup>20</sup> The *New York Times* featured an article on victory rallies led by Wyrzten in Madison Square Garden. One of the speakers was a bank president, and there was an all-girl choir.<sup>21</sup> However, Youth for Christ also had to contend with negative charges, such as an Episcopal bishop claiming the movement was fascist and discriminatory. He stated the group was anti-Catholic, anti-African American, and anti-Semitic. Wyrzten flatly denied these charges. He spoke of the movement making none of these distinctions and being part of the solution to racial tensions

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Senter, "The Youth for Christ Movement as an Educational Agency and Its Impact upon Protestant Churches, 1931-1979" (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 1989), 109, 112, eCommons Dissertations.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-132, 134.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-222.

<sup>21</sup> Rachel K. McDowell, "Victory Rallies in Garden Today," *New York Times*, September 29, 1945, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/09/29/305522712.html?pageNumber=13>.

rather than part of the problem.<sup>22</sup> In all, Youth for Christ became a major movement after World War II, symbolizing the nation's uptick in religious observance.

### 1950s Sermons

Before further describing aspects of 1950s Christianity in America, it is worth examining the content of a few sermons by preachers. Father Divine, a prominent Pentecostal preacher, gave a sermon on God's presence in 1950. He opened by declaring he was unifying the children of man. Then he harkened to the days of creation where nothing was impossible to man. He said his purposes were the universal brotherhood of man and helping the world to recognize the fatherhood of God. He called for one global nation free from division and strife and with liberty and justice for all. He noted Christians had been waiting 1,900 years for God's kingdom. Then he hearkened to John's Revelation. "Heaven is a state of consciousness," he announced. He said that "heaven and the kingdom have come, and the will is being done." He mentioned the holidays of the Christian calendar and then declared, "Christ has risen." Abraham Lincoln desired a new birth of freedom, he said. Now they had it. He spoke of Jesus's commission and then quoted the verse, "His name shall be called Immanuel."<sup>23</sup> In his preaching, Divine made bold statements with which many Christians would disagree in assuring his audience. Notable was his global vision as the United States took on a global role.

Another Pentecostal message was A. A. Allen's. He opened by recounting asking his wife to lock him in a closet so he could draw closer to God. He wrote that he saw light and

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<sup>22</sup> "Lauds 'Youth for Christ,'" *New York Times*, October 27, 1945, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/10/27/94028896.html?pageNumber=24>.

<sup>23</sup> "Father Divine's sermons in audio," Father Divine International Peace Mission Movement, recorded on April 9, 1950, <http://peacemission.info/sermons-by-father-divine/father-divines-sermons-in-audio/>.

understood this as God's glory. He stated he heard God speaking to him. Then he cut to his commitment (or conversion) to Christianity and his calling to be a minister. He started at a Methodist church, found a Pentecostal one, married, and then led his own church. Within a few years, he sought to perform miracles himself and prayed God would reveal to him how.<sup>24</sup> He said God gave him "a list of the things which stood between me and the power" to perform miracles, with each item a brief explanation. He wrote them down. His book was devoted to 11 of the 13 requirements of the list. The other two were too personal for him to share. The table of contents of his book listed these themes plus a few additional chapters. Allen imparted this experience in over 100 pages.<sup>25</sup>

Oral Roberts preached a sermon about Daniel, specifically about whether one will bow down to the world or stand for God. He started with the verses where Nebuchadnezzar demanded Shadrach, Meshach, and Aved-Nego to bow to his idols (Daniel 3:14-29). He read through Nebuchadnezzar's declaration that anyone who maligned God would be cut in pieces. A prayer followed for his audience for Jesus's and angels' presence and defense against Satan. He wanted to heal them. Then he focused on the fourth figure whom Nebuchadnezzar saw with Shadrach, Meshach, and Aved-Nego. He reviewed sacrifices made at God's house, the temple, and the activities of prophets to the nation of Israel. Next, he discussed Babylon, its size, its idolatrous temple, and the hanging gardens by the Euphrates River. There were Nebuchadnezzar's military conquests over other idolatrous nations. Per Roberts, the statue mentioned in the passage he read was of Nebuchadnezzar. Music was played to see whether the people worshipped the king. Roberts described Babel's conquest of Judea and the three Jews' observance of God's commandment not to worship any graven image. Roberts said one lesson from these events was

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<sup>24</sup> A. A. Allen, *The Price of God's Miracle Working Power* (Yuma, CO: Jawbone Digital, 2017), 1-6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12, 14.

a religious person would be challenged in one's life. Those who did not worship God would put one's religion under trial.<sup>26</sup> In this case, Roberts gave a solid sermon based on a biblical passage with a practical message to his audience. His comment about facing trials living with faith demonstrated dealing with unfaithful people was by the 1950s a relevant issue, showing the impact theological liberalism and the Great Depression had. It could be said generally about less devout people but it was akin to the times.

In 1954, preacher Jack Coe offered personal testimony. He discussed instances of God speaking to a donkey and to a rooster per the Gospels. He said he hoped God would "anoint" his words too and that he would encourage his audience to pray. Then he led a song with the lyric, "I've got peace like a river in my soul." He spoke of an event in Philadelphia where all but 16 of 93 people there in hospital beds got up after it and walked home. He said there was a revival in the land. He commented that while some pastors said it was too late to bring the uncommitted to God, he wanted to guide lost souls. He said the revival in the last days before the Second Coming would be like the Big Dipper and revivals in earlier days like the Little Dipper. Then he shared an anecdote about his "being saved."<sup>27</sup> Coe was a personable preacher with relatable material who speculated about Christians' coming millennium. His sermon represented traditional Christian views with some of his own thinking. The Great Depression and World War II had taken an immense toll on traditional religious practice, but these served to make clear that a central part of evangelicalism was the seminaries.

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<sup>26</sup> "Oral Roberts - The 4th Man (1950's)," YouTube.com, posted on August 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHnniRcNjN4>.

<sup>27</sup> "Jack Coe Personal Testimony - 1954 Washington DC," YouTube.com, posted on April 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2aVxPXh1Kw>.

## Religious Splits

Evangelicalism was going steady despite the struggles to have people maintain their religion in the preceding period. Specifically, new Bible schools were popping up to teach people a fundamentalist path to life. One was Fuller Theological Seminary, founded in 1947. By the 1950s, it was in position to make profitable contacts with conservative businessmen. One who was sympathetic was J. Howard Pew, head of the Sun Oil Company. He was concerned about the spread of modernism in the northern Presbyterian Church and thought that in parallel with teaching the Gospels, fundamentalists should promote capitalism against the communist threat. While most students were conservatives and all but a handful were not liberal, Fuller Seminary only took on directly political stances when it began seeking outside funds. This worked with Pew who gave a donation, including underwriting a series of presentations on the positives of the free market, namely that it was God-ordained.<sup>28</sup> Conservative religion took root in new institutions in the 1950s.

There was also a split between fundamentalists and evangelicals. Specifically, Billy Graham sought to establish a publication to shore up traditional Christians intellectually, which communism, arguing that Senator Joseph McCarthy and his investigative hearing were doing more damage than domestic communists. While still holding onto some fundamentalist principles, some evangelizing Christians endeavored to shed themselves of negative connotations of fundamentalism, such as separatism, anti-intellectualism, and contentiousness.<sup>29</sup>

Another point of division among traditional Christians was the founding of the modern

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<sup>28</sup> George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 154-157.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-162.

state of Israel. On the one hand, fundamentalist J. Frank Norris and others held the view that this was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. He desired for the Southern Baptist Convention to send a telegram congratulating President Truman on his recognition of Israel. However, this measure was voted down. Only a minority held the view that the ingathering of Jews to the land of Israel presaged the Second Coming. On the other hand, Southern Baptists associated Zionism with progress and Western civilization and saw Arabs as backwards. They saw Israel as neglected under Ottoman rule, hampered by Islamic fanaticism and Orthodox Christian idolatry.<sup>30</sup> Arab Baptists were critical of Zionism and Islam, and they sought to promote missions for Arabs. Some viewed Zionism as in opposition to the Gospels. A few went so far to criticize premillennialism and called Zionism an imposition upon Arabs. Yet another view was to support Israel to strengthen the United Nations. Amidst all this, President Truman did not view the reestablishment of Israel as a biblically prophesized event, yet he was sympathetic to Zionism in light of the Holocaust.<sup>31</sup> While conservative Christianity (along with Christianity in general) thrived during the 1950s, there were still areas where it splintered.

The 1950s do not have the reputation of the 1960s as countercultural but there was one area where this was the case: the Supreme Court. Certain rulings shattered religion's place in children's lives. These rulings of the American legal system eventually culminated in the 2002 judgment by a federal circuit court that the Pledge of Allegiance was unconstitutional for including the phrase "under God." Before this, cases ranged from the reimbursement to parents by a New Jersey school district for busing costs including for Catholic schools, to the permissibility of widespread voluntary religious instruction classes in public schools for

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<sup>30</sup> Walker Robins, *Between Dixie and Zion: Southern Baptists and Palestine before Israel*, Kindle ed. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2020), location 312-324, 354-375.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, location 396-405, 435-445.

Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, to a New York City policy that allowed students to attend religious instruction during the school day outside of school. In 1961, a nondenominational Regents' prayer was struck down, and soon after daily Bible readings.<sup>32</sup> In 1971, government aid to religious schools was disallowed. One contrast to this anti-religion trend in rulings was *Sherbert v. Verner* (1963) where the Supreme Court ruled a Seventh Day Adventist had the right to collect unemployment benefits due to her struggle to find work because she would not work on Saturdays. However, this religious protection was later narrowed in scope in a 1990 case regarding a Native American religious ritual involving a hallucinogenic drug.<sup>33</sup>

America has always been a monotheist nation. Religious pluralism was present between America's colonies from their founding, but belief in God was the common expression of most immigrants. Exceptions included Native Americans and African slaves. However, when the nation of Israel was granted the land of Canaan by God, the reasons were the Canaanites' idolatry and abominable practices. While people's beliefs and practices varied in the 1950s, the Supreme Court was at odds with general practice in inhibiting each religious group's children from worshipping God at school in their own way. The Supreme Court has gone on to rule on other matters where God's commandments say something specific and the Court rules otherwise, most notably same-sex relations. Different people have different views and today secularism is more dominant than religion compared with the period under study. It is unfortunate that many American court rulings in the past century have served to distance the citizens of a traditionally monotheist country of Christian pluralism from practicing their religion. In this respect, the nation has greatly changed and perhaps nowhere is this more recognizable than Supreme Court

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<sup>32</sup> Vincent Phillip Munoz, *Religious Liberty and the American Supreme Court: The Essential Cases and Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 1, 3-5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

decisions.

### **Religious Distractions and Commitment**

1950s religious practice faced other obstacles beyond those for schoolchildren. In *God and Man at Yale*, written in 1951, William F. Buckley, Jr. represented some prominent professors as ridiculing religion and advancing atheism during his time as an undergraduate there. The Religion Department had a weak commitment to Christianity, while the Economics and Political Science Departments taught liberalism and bordered on collectivism.<sup>34</sup> Students viewed religion courses as easy A's. The most popular religion course at Yale was taught by a university chaplain who did not promote Christianity, even though some students were inspired by his example. All the major religion courses took a neutral or critical viewpoint of Christianity, not providing support for devout students. In addition, the university did not require students to take a religion class, so less than 10 percent of students did.<sup>35</sup> However, the book was generally panned, including by the Catholic press which said Buckley was too individualistic and removed from papal statements on social justice.<sup>36</sup>

In the mass media, there was existentialism, a theology contrary to traditional monotheist beliefs. This system of thought proposed that the universe was absurd and one was free to make choices, although one could not discern rational criteria for them. In this manner, one developed a nature, moving beyond mere existence. Adherents emphasized anxiety, alienation, and

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<sup>34</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict*, Kindle ed., (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), location 1131-1137.

<sup>35</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom,"* 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2021), 5-6, 8-9.

<sup>36</sup> Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace*, location 1137.

ideological disillusionment. One variety, associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, was atheism. A Christian version, traced to Søren Kierkegaard, sometimes intermingled with neoorthodoxy. Neoorthodoxy was a theology by the influential Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth. He emphasized God's otherness from humanity, rejecting the power to discern Him via reason or nature. He saw humans as sinful and dependent on Scripture to know God. He opposed worship of race and nation, standing against Nazism. He took a more muted approach to communism, believing it less of a threat and that it would prove itself bad. While Barth was influential, his neoorthodoxy did not detract from Christianity as much, instead becoming another thread people could follow. However, it had an opponent in Pope Pius XII.<sup>37</sup>

Another religious development was belief in unidentified flying objects. The presence of extraterrestrials would have significance religiously. Some claimed to be contacted by aliens. These were characterized as technologically advanced, warning the inhabitants of Earth to repent and change, the former domain of prophets. George Adamski claimed such a conversation, claiming the supposed other inhabitants of the solar system had cosmic law which Earth should adopt.<sup>38</sup> Strange beliefs emerged in the 1950s.

Other alternatives to religion gained something of a following. Beats, countercultural youth, were fascinated by Zen Buddhism before being introduced to psychedelic drugs. While Americans did not generally engage in idol worship in their exposure to Buddhism, some were intrigued by talks by Zen guru D. T. Suzuki and the like. Some sought nontraditional healing, showing interest in Christian Science. There was empirical work on extrasensory perception. This all foreshadowed the outburst of non-monotheist practices like astrology and tarot cards in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., location 1224, 1235, 1270-1280, 1291, 1303.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., location 1421-1432.

the 1960s.<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding distractions, evangelicals held high hopes on matters of family and the Second Coming. They still interpreted events in conjunction with their belief in Jesus's eminent return. This was particularly true when it came to Israel. Atomic bomb droppings and the Cold War also lent to the view these were the last days. The Scofield Reference Bible, a popular resource of premillennialists, enjoyed high sales. Evangelical seminaries and schools, such as Wheaton, required faculty to declare their belief in premillennialism, that upon the return of the Messiah a millennium of peace and prosperity would ensue unmatched by the secular world. Scholars published academic works on this topic.<sup>40</sup> However, evangelicals did not view themselves as strictly fundamentalist, preferring to appeal to others who might not share premillennialist views but were interested in Christianity. They emphasized strong Christian homes, that even if piety left schools and churches closed, committed families would ensure the survival of evangelical Christianity. This theme only grew in emphasis in the following decades. These hopes contrasted with a materialistic world and unsympathetic schools and courts. Faith gave these Christians a sense of meaning and identity beyond what was available in the world at large.<sup>41</sup>

In all, the 1950s were not just a religious decade. The years were filled with political concerns, anti-communism, and some inklings of developments which would take hold in the 1960s. However, an uptick in religion was a core aspect, via sermons, a government sympathetic to Christianity, and growing institutions. Religion was threatened by divisions over

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., location 3080-3090.

<sup>40</sup> David Harrington Watt, "The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, 1925-1975," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 1, No. 2 (1991): 155, 160-161.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 162, 164, 166.

fundamentalism and Israel and hostile court rulings and university professors, but religious practice was widespread for the time. It was in the 1960s that these elements would undermine high levels of religious attendance, but religion also shaped the nation through its role in the Civil Rights Movement. The Catholic Church took social stances as well. It is this period that will be explored next.

### **Denominationalism and Religious Tolerance**

One trend in American religious practice by the 1960s was denominationalism. This came to the forefront again in 1960 when John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, ran for president. According to one study of Protestants around San Francisco in the early 1960s, a ninth thought that being part of a particular denomination was necessary for salvation. A third thought that this would help. Also, a third drew the majority of their close friends from their congregation. Cross-denominational interaction was limited. 90 percent of Southern Baptists in a 1956 study opposed giving sacraments to members of other denominations. They believed rebaptism was necessary to join their church. Episcopalians generally opposed interdenominational services that included communion. Only half condoned hearing ministers from other denominations preach at their church.<sup>42</sup> However, ecumenical organizations also emerged with an eye towards merging denominations. For example, in 1962, the Lutheran Church in America was formed as a merger between five Lutheran denominations. The Consultation on Church Union explored possibilities for cooperation and potential union between a Presbyterian church, the Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ. However, between 1945 and 1985, the

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 78-79.

number of denominations with 50,000 members grew from 54 to 89. Protestants became more dispersed by denomination, overshadowing any mergers. Over a similar period, Jews and Catholics became less concentrated and more dispersed.<sup>43</sup> In all, denominations still were a source of division in the 1960s.

Denominationalism could be found in the Episcopal Church. This example illustrates how a trend of the period unfolded. The Episcopal Church had few schisms up to the 1960s. One schism organized dissatisfied African Americans under the African Orthodox Church. The other was influenced by East Coast churches. However, from 1963 to 1972, a few splinter groups emerged. The first was the Anglican Orthodox Church in 1963. Its organizer, Reverend James Parker Dees, disliked how liberal doctrine watered down the denomination and disliked the use of blessings from Mary, calling them superstitious. Also, he opposed communism and supported the American system, as opposed to the Episcopal Church's stance of recognizing communist China.<sup>44</sup> The American Episcopal Church emerged in 1968 after a bishop, James Pike, gave a sermon on his doubts about the dogmas. Its members believed George McGovern's party had captured the Episcopal Church, so politics was a factor in its formation. It formed from six parishes, four of which were from the Anglican Orthodox Church. It remained on the East Coast and maintained relations with Anglican denominations. The Anglican Episcopal Church of North America was the western counterpart of the American Episcopal Church. Its parishes also left the Anglican Orthodox Church and were dissatisfied with Episcopalians. In 1975, it formed an Anglican Episcopal Council of Churches with a handful of other churches across the country. Issues in the 1970s, such as a prayerbook revision and the vesting of women spurred further

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 82-85.

<sup>44</sup> Don S. Armentrout, "Episcopal Splinter Groups: Schisms in the Episcopal Church, 1963-1985," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 55, No. 4 (1986): 295-297.

splintering.<sup>45</sup> Both politics and theological liberalism prompted some Episcopalians to form their own denomination.

During his 1960 campaign, Kennedy gave a speech on religious tolerance. His election was a pivotal moment in religious relations in the United States. As he was running, many Protestants had concerns over whether his Catholic faith would allow him to make independent decisions as president, as opposed to being a subject of the Catholic Church. Kennedy emphasized there were more pressing issues, such as hungry children and communism in Cuba, but that the issue of his religion was obscuring the campaign. He stated his belief in the separation of church and state, meaning no Catholic authority would tell him how to act, no minister would tell a congregation how to vote, and no church or church school would be granted public funds. He said America was a country of religious liberty, not a Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish country. Religious persecution was a danger to all groups, even though Catholics were under scrutiny with his candidacy. Kennedy wished for an end to religious intolerance. He opposed a religious test for public office. He said he would govern by the Constitution and asked that he be judged on his congressional record. He hoped religion would not be the deciding factor in the election, as it would send a negative message to 40 million American Catholics.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the first Catholic to run for president, Al Smith, Kennedy took the religious issue head-on, and in November, he narrowly won.

Another watershed moment for religion in America was the Second Vatican Council. While the vast majority of Americans were not Catholic, the outcome of this series of meetings

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 300, 302-306.

<sup>46</sup> "Transcript: JFK's Speech on His Religion," NPR, last modified December 5, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

changed the religion meaningfully. The papal declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* declared the Catholic Church's support of religious freedom. It said civil society should not be coerced into religion, nor should an individual. It acknowledged reason and free will as two human faculties. Therefore, a person had the choice to pursue truth or not, and the Catholic Church would not impede those without interest in religion. The document made statements of core Christian belief, such as in Jesus, and monotheistic belief, such as in Providence. It called for religious freedom to apply to communities and especially families. Religious freedom was the prerogative of citizens, groups, government, and the Catholic Church. It was up to all of them to seek the common welfare. The document had some similar appeals as America's Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights:

The protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of man ranks among the essential duties of government. Therefore government is to assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all its citizens, in an effective manner, by just laws and by other appropriate means.<sup>47</sup>

*Dignitatis Humanae* represented an emphasis on religious tolerance and freedom of belief.

Trends of the 1960s would pave the way to reduced prejudice among religions.

The Vatican went even further in *Nostra Aetate*. It emphasized the preeminence of God over all religions and asserted that different religions all sought to answer similar questions about life. It ascribed assets to Hinduism and Buddhism, neither of which are monotheistic religions, in respect to answering them. The document encouraged dialogue and collaboration with other religions. It noted the Catholic Church had a positive view of Muslims, stating similarities and differences with Christian belief. It urged Christians and Muslims to forget past hostilities and work towards mutual understanding and social justice. It stated not all Jews should be held

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<sup>47</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Dignitatis Humanae," the Holy See, accessed on March 30, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html).

responsible for Jesus's execution nor should they be viewed as a rejected people. It decried anti-Semitism.<sup>48</sup> While seeking common ground with Muslims and encouraging peace and emphasizing a less critical view of Jews and opposing discrimination were significant developments with monotheists, the comments about Hindus and Buddhists are surprising. Indeed, there are Catholics today who encourage such pluralism absent an exclusive commitment to God. A commandment or two has been disavowed by the Catholic Church in the past decades. However, it is notable that an attitude akin to this was declared back in the 1960s. In tracking the evolution of Catholicism over the centuries, the Second Vatican Council was a key event.

### **1960s Religious Messages**

Before exploring outcomes of the Second Vatican Council further, it is worthwhile to review some of the religious messages contemporaneous to it. A notable effort was the program *Life is Worth Living* by Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. It lasted from 1951 to 1957 and Sheen would follow it with another televised program in the 1960s. In the first episode of the television program, he discussed patriotism. He told a story of God telling Peter in Latin that there would be another crucifixion in Rome. The significance of this was to teach the Latin phrase, "Quo vadis," or "Where are you going?" He said patriotism was a word rarely used in America in contemporary times. He related it to the Greek *pietas* which he defined as, "Love of God, love of neighbor, love of country." This is a counterintuitive connection to draw as most Greeks were not monotheist. He shifted gears to the fact America is a revolutionary country and he called his times revolutionary. He said the American Revolution was over the right of Americans to govern

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<sup>48</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Nostra Aetate," the Holy See, accessed on March 30, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

themselves. The revolution in his time was about violence. This stemmed from elites seeking dominance through its use. They were defined through their opposition of policies and were unclear about what they supported.<sup>49</sup> The cultural issues of the time crept into the religious sphere and Bishop Sheen argued against extremism.

Sheen also wrote a book in 1968 entitled *The Wit and Wisdom of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen*. One chapter was about love of God. He stated God created the world because it had too much goodness not to create it. He characterized the quest for God as “essentially the search for the full account and meaning of life.”<sup>50</sup> Expectations would result in disappointment. Only a love of God would satisfy, not sex, power, or money. He associated happiness with letting time pass easily doing something one enjoys. He said people are meant to run on God’s commandments and like a car with improper fuel, they will not operate on something else. “God really loves us and, because He loves us, He is not disinterested.”<sup>51</sup> Sheen compared a person’s worship of God to a child giving a parent a token gift. One does not need it, but it is a good sign of the child’s character, expressing gratitude and devotion. Worship, he wrote, is an opportunity to express one’s love of God which makes one happy. He expressed wonder that God created humans and declared the world would become better when people improved themselves.<sup>52</sup> This chapter was not exactly a fundamentals lesson on Christianity, but it did convey basic monotheist beliefs about God and a person’s relationship with Him.

In 1960, Reverend Edward L. R. Elson sought to explain some fundamentals of

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<sup>49</sup> “Life is Worth Living | Episode 1 | Quo Vadis America | Fulton Sheen,” YouTube.com, posted on May 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQA9nxUtIew>.

<sup>50</sup> Fulton J. Sheen, *The Wit and Wisdom of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen*, ed. Bill Adler (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 67, 70.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-74.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-77.

Christianity. He lauded Jesus. He called him God's word to man. He noted "God's forgiveness, God's mercy, God's healing, God's presence do not change. He is forever alive, forever available."<sup>53</sup> He discussed the Christian timeframe for the belief in Jesus's resurrection. He described the account of Mary, Peter, and John experiencing this. He continued with the Gospel narrative, noting Jesus's followers after his execution. He characterized them as feeling Jesus's spirit. He discussed Thomas's skepticism until he was party to this too. Elson mentioned his personal experience of walking by the California shores, reading the Gospels, and connecting with Jesus.<sup>54</sup> He wrote of others who claimed they had witnessed Jesus's presence. Then he returned to Thomas again. He referred to the Gospel account of Jesus performing miracles and the personality of Jesus. He expressed excitement over the Gospel news.<sup>55</sup> Elson's words were very tied to the Gospels as he interspersed remarks about Christian beliefs in contemporary settings.

A 1960s sermon by preacher T. L. Osborn discussed the Christian notion of a demon possessing a boy. He had convulsions and was deaf. Osborn said there are ailments without cures where one needs a miracle. So the father of the boy took him to some Christian disciples who used methods to attempt to cast out "the devil" from the boy. Osborn emphasized God cares about the sick and stated that Jesus bore sicknesses. Per the preacher, where the disciples failed, Jesus succeeded. He told his audience to count on Jesus for salvation, deliverance, and cure. It is notable he did not say God. In fact, he said nothing was impossible for Jesus. This kind of emphasis is a difference in belief distinct to Christianity. The father prayed to Jesus, not to God, for a cure. Osborn recounted that Jesus spoke to the father that he needed to believe Jesus could

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<sup>53</sup> Edward L. R. Elson, *And Still He Speaks* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1960), 19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21, 31-32, 34-35, 39-40.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, 43-44, 46, 48.

cure the boy. The father declared this and the boy became alright again.<sup>56</sup> Osborn gave a distinctly Christian message. These were not the only religious messages from the 1960s, but this sampling shows a conservative thread of preaching that was well alive in turbulent times.

Last, one can look to the remarks of President Johnson in his 1965 inaugural address about America's relationship with God. He held that his oath of office was before God. The generation must choose its destiny, he admonished. He alluded to technological change and new capabilities of destruction. He said, "Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people and on their faith." He mentioned an American covenant with the land for justice, liberty, and union. Keeping it would bring prosperity. This sounded akin to God's covenant with Israel. He noted America must stop poverty, provide medicine, and give education to youth. Wasted resources, according to Johnson, was the real enemy. Justice also meant harmony among races and religions. He might have included idolatries, although one can only speculate from this passage. He continued that America was a place where one could make full use of one's talents. The American covenant meant the liberation of humanity. He decried isolationism and hatred. Instead, each should advance the purpose of America. And with cooperation, all could become wealthier. He appealed to Americans to reject old hatreds. He said, "But we have no promise from God that our greatness will endure. We have been allowed by Him to seek greatness with the sweat of our hands and the strength of our spirit." He concluded asking for wisdom and knowledge to fulfill his role.<sup>57</sup> Johnson linked a holy covenant with America's fortunes and his own policy principals. Religion was entering politics.

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<sup>56</sup> "TL Osborn - The Demon Possessed Boy (excerpt) [1960s Sermon]," YouTube.com, posted on January 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0NOhE9u1Bc>.

<sup>57</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "The President's Inaugural Address", The American Presidency Project, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-inaugural-address>.

## Churches and Civil Rights

In terms of other trends, one theme of the Second Vatican Council was ecumenism. This had a direct application to American life. A 1956 study by John L. Thomas found 25 to 35 percent of Catholics had mixed marriages. There were organizations like Action for Interracial Understanding and the National Conference of Christians and Jews. A religious dialogue emerged between Catholics and between Protestants. Social, cultural, and religious boundaries lessened even as lingering hostilities remained. The Catholic Church called for Christian unity. Some bishops recommended moving away from any defensiveness to present Catholicism in a positive manner which attracted non-Catholics. One bishop suggested inviting Methodist and Lutheran leaders to the Council.<sup>58</sup> In 1962, Anna Holden issued “A Call to Catholics” noting their lack of involvement in secular causes like civil rights and racial equality. She called for direct action. Six Catholics’ participation in such an event in Albany, Georgia, brought an ecumenical experience with Protestants, Jews, and African Americans. People prayed for the success of their effort.<sup>59</sup> John XXIII’s convening of an ecumenical council encouraged additional openness. Catholics’ involvement in a National Conference on Religion and Race would affect how the Second Vatican Council was received. The conference emphasized equality, human dignity, and ecumenical action.<sup>60</sup> The Second Vatican Council affected and corresponded with ecumenical efforts in the United States, including civil rights.

A good number of churches were invested in civil rights. This harkened to social gospel

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<sup>58</sup> Joseph P. Chinnici, “Ecumenism, Civil Rights, and the Second Vatican Council: The American Experience,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 30, No. 3 (2012): 23-27, 29.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-33.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-36.

efforts earlier in the century. The civil rights movement expanded the role of religion in America, bringing lasting legal change. The National Council of Churches (NCC) was a strong advocate. It was a theological liberal body established in 1950. It repeatedly stated its opposition to racial discrimination, although some criticized it for not acting externally, preferring conferences, workshops, and resolutions. Events such as James Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi and Birmingham protests and boycotts prodded liberal churches in particular to direct action. Some national religious figures were arrested during a July 4, 1963, sit-in.<sup>61</sup> The United Presbyterian Church started a Commission on Religion and Race in 1963, giving it a \$500,000 first year budget. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. published his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in *Christian Century*, committing himself to fight racial and economic injustice. The NCC devoted resources to lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C. Churchgoers participated in the March on Washington. Church leaders met with politicians including President Kennedy to advocate on civil rights. There was a "Midwest strategy" to appeal to Republicans on religious grounds to support civil rights legislation.<sup>62</sup> In the 1960s, churches began taking on social issues again and played a significant role in the political process.

For some, civil rights was an issue they advocated for a decade or more. Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, a pastor and an influencer at Howard University's law school, delivered a speech at the Bethel AME Church. He stated the South had made great progress since the Civil War. Neither party could count on an African American's vote. However, African Americans were only a tenth or so of the population. He said, "We have no power whatsoever to force a program

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<sup>61</sup> James F. Findlay, "Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *The Journal of American History* 77, No. 1 (1990): 66-68.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 71-72, 74.

of any kind. We have only the power to persuade.” And to do so was a divine mission.<sup>63</sup> There was the task of eliminating segregation in schools, courts, public places, hotels, and employment. African Americans sought a new attitude from Caucasians. They had shown contempt and condescension. He wanted equal opportunity for work in the South, not just agricultural, menial domestic, and semiskilled managerial labor. Desired work included in department stores, banks, science, and technology. Johnson argued the South never had true democracy and was dominated by one party. He said it was not Christian, as Christianity held that all individuals had equal worth. He would not sponsor a campaign for the YMCA because of its segregation. He named James Byrnes as an enemy, even though he admired a Southerner’s rise. Johnson noted by far the majority of the world—two thirds—did not have white-colored skin. He blamed segregation on colonialism which spread it around the world.<sup>64</sup> Before the passage of civil rights legislation, discrimination was a topic discussed in some churches, predominantly African American.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was perhaps the foremost leader in this area. He attended Crozer Theological Seminary. The school was theologically liberal and King was only 19 when he enrolled. He was not the strongest student in university or seminary at first, but in his final year at Crozer he aced all of his classes. He was one of 11 African American students from a little more than 90. He had a sense of representing a race. From one course he took, he developed a belief in archaeological evidence and a scientific approach to the Bible. He considered whether parts of it were mythical. Still, he believed in its essential truths and viewed it as a logical, devotional, aspirational, and moral tool. Through Jeremiah, he saw religion as a

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<sup>63</sup> Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Volume 1*, Kindle ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), location 267, 282-303.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, location 311-341, 356-371, 386, 417.

means for progress and a personal relationship with God.<sup>65</sup> A particular influence on King was George Washington Davis. Davis's course focused on modern Christian liberalism. He began writing more thoughtful essays, although he failed to provide proper footnotes to complement his bibliographies. King saw the Bible as the revelation of the divine rather than God's literal word. He viewed Jesus as human and rejected Christian beliefs that contradicted modern science such as Mary having a virgin birth, the eventuality of a Second Coming, and resurrection. However, he was also at times critical of liberal theology, falling somewhere between it and between neo-orthodoxy. He was uncertain about God's role in the world, whether He intervened or was passive and whether God was personal. His sermons were more intellectual than emotional. He believed in the need for force to coerce sinful people from injuring each other. He thought a Christian nation should intervene to help an oppressed nation. His positions echoed Reinhold Niebuhr, although King was committed to the social gospel.<sup>66</sup> In all, one of the leading civil rights advocates had a theologically liberal background and wrestled with academics and theological uncertainty in some of his formative years.

In his early years as a preacher, King delivered a number of sermons that provide a sense of a future civil rights leader's broader perspective. One was an acceptance address for Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He spoke of the responsibility of being a pastor. He noted the times were filled with the potential for war and churches could provide a path to peace and happiness. He said the generation was decadent. He acknowledged his fallibility and stated his desire to be a servant of Christ. He felt the spirit to preach to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to offer

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<sup>65</sup> Clayborne Carson, "Martin Luther King Jr.: The Crozer Seminary Years," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 16 (1997): 123-124.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-126, 128.

deliverance to captives, and to bring liberty to the injured.<sup>67</sup> In short, King outlined a vision for himself that would grow with time.

A few months later, King delivered a sermon about God's love. He opened with the question of whether the universe was friendly. He offered Shakespeare's answer in *MacBeth*, poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar's answer in a poem, and then Christianity's answer: yes. He quoted John to support this. He characterized God's love as unceasing and eternal. He said love is part of God's nature. He pointed to the limited spans of empires and civilizations and declared God's love outlasts them. Specifically, God loves the world. Per the Gospels, God's love was not limited to Israel. This was a ray of hope, particularly in times of slavery. God gave His love as a gift. Then King quoted related verses of poetry. He went so far as to say that God's love saves people from death. He affirmed Paul that nothing can separate one from God's love.<sup>68</sup> This was a topical sermon which mentioned the Gospels but was not centered on them. There was nothing heretical in his message, albeit given God's power to wreak destruction as featured in most of the Bible, the sermon was focused. This gives one a sense of what a civil rights leader might discuss beyond civil rights.

One last sermon of King's discussed mental and spiritual slavery. He quoted another poet on the topic. The excerpt was about being in fear of speaking, being right, hatred, and abuse. King called this mental slavery. He said this applied to Pilate for following the crowd. Also, it was true of many people for being conformist. This was the case for Caucasians who feared to oppose racism. He drew attention to churches' conformity. He argued that when society's mores

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<sup>67</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Acceptance Address at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," Coretta Scott King Collection, Folder 118, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/acceptance-address-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "'God's Love,' Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," Coretta Scott King Collection, Folder 142, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/gods-love-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>.

and patterns conflict with its ideals and degrade people, each person had a duty to revolt against them. This applied to war, capitalist inequalities, and race. He lauded the minority who advocated for public education, religious liberty, and free scientific inquiry. He referred to a professor's talk on the well-adjusted life and then shifted to Christians' obligation not to conform. He mentioned situations of a judge sparing an innocent, unpopular man, a politician choosing truth over votes, a businessman choosing truth over a sharp business practice to profit more, and a minister choosing truth over popularity. He concluded that Jesus was the influential man, not Pilate.<sup>69</sup> Here, King provided his own analysis for an event in the Gospels, going freely to advocate non-conformity for the sake of an ideal. His message briefly touched on politics. In this sermon, there is both a message looser from the Bible that can be associated with theological liberalism and a social element that fits with the reputation of a future civil rights leader.

The organization of pastors of which King and many prominent civil rights leaders were a part was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). From its name, one can see how much civil rights permeated the religious sphere. It became influential because the African American leaders who managed with segregation, high school principals and college presidents, lost their base of support over issues like bus boycotts. Instead, religious leaders emerged to lead protest efforts. They were obscure to Caucasian elites who thought them to be radicals and communists thriving on deceit. Clergy were effective because unlike most, they did not rely on another group for their livelihoods. They represented their own communities and so they could act more independently. Self-sufficiency, which was promoted by segregation, was the path to political activism. A bus boycott in Baton Rouge achieved first-come-first-serve seating with

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<sup>69</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "'Mental and Spiritual Slavery,' Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," Coretta Scott King Collection, Folders 113 and 124, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/mental-and-spiritual-slavery-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>.

African Americans taking their first seats in the rear. It took only a week.<sup>70</sup> However, in Montgomery, negotiations failed. The boycotts attracted national attention. This reinforced clergy's role as leaders and gave them desired prestige. Churches were hubs of information and were the most respected institution among African Americans in the South.<sup>71</sup>

Civil rights extended beyond political legislation to a Poor People's Campaign akin to earlier decades' social gospel efforts. The SCLC requested part of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church to administer this. The purpose of the campaign was to address systemic poverty. Participants would encamp the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and lobby legislators and the Johnson administration. The New York Avenue congregation desired to act presciently and welcome others. Supporting this cause was a chance to speak truth to power. The church's history hearkened back to Abraham Lincoln whose family rented a pew and worshipped there regularly during his presidency. After World War II, the congregation shifted its focus from individual salvation to social activism.<sup>72</sup> This was in part due to declining membership in the 1960s. The church was rebuilt and pastoral efforts targeted a less affluent neighborhood as some members moved away to the suburbs, prompting more communal involvement. In earlier days, hundreds would come to hear words on the Gospel. New York Avenue had a preexisting relationship with the SCLC from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It had hosted march participants. The pastor's wife and a staff member also went to Selma to help with voting rights.<sup>73</sup> Some churches did not just support a cause but rather the broader Civil Rights

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<sup>70</sup> Adam Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People: The Origins and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1959," *The Journal of Southern History* 52, No. 3 (1986): 403-405, 410.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 409, 411.

<sup>72</sup> Paul B. Dornan, "'But These People Are Coming': New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and the Poor People's Campaign," *Washington History* 33, No. 2 (2021): 7-8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Movement as it evolved.

### **Religious Pluralism**

A few African Americans turned to Islam. Proselytizing efforts from the Nation of Islam began with the man credited as its founder, Farad Muhammad, in 1930. Purportedly, he was a peddler and ex-convict who went from house to house in Michigan. He told African Americans that Arabic was their original language and Islam their religion. Both were lost due to slavery. Farad made a small footprint, but his assistant Elijah Poole, who worshipped him, would become known as Elijah Muhammad. Released from jail in 1946 for draft evasion, he advocated racial separatism and ethnic pride. His assistant, Malcolm X, portrayed Martin Luther King, Jr. and other African American leaders as self-hating people humbling themselves to the other race. Both Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X advocated African American-owned businesses, schools, and institutions. Malcolm X decried “blue-eyed devils” and spoke against feelings of racial inferiority. The Nation of Islam had two single sex organizations and primary and secondary schools.<sup>74</sup> Muslim businesses associated themselves with the group. Estimates of membership ranged from 10,000 to 100,000 without a reliable census. The Nation of Islam gained national attention as a result of a miniseries on television by Mike Wallace entitled “The Hate that Hate Produced.” The press then portrayed the group as anti-American and black supremacist. African American civil rights leaders denounced it as a hate group. Muslims joined in the condemning. One group, the Islamic Party of North America, called the Nation of Islam

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<sup>74</sup> Edward E. Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2-3.

heretics. However, scholar Edward E. Curtis IV viewed the Nation of Islam as authentic.<sup>75</sup>

Religion mixed with politics could be controversial but one feature of the 1960s was its religious pluralism.

Religious pluralism, like some contemporaneous social movements of the 1960s, was countercultural. A rejection of contemporary morality accompanied acceptance of an alternative. Allen Ginsberg called for tribal wisdom and mystical experience. There was an influx of Asian idolatries including Hinduism and Buddhism. There were communal experiments such as Students for a Democratic Society.<sup>76</sup> There was a pagan element. Rebels were interested in shamanism, as they decried technocracy. They broke with narratives of Judaism, Christianity, and secularism about history and progress. They desired spiritual insight in the here and now. The earlier Transcendentalist Movement in American history became religious in the 1960s.<sup>77</sup>

Even evangelicals adapted a countercultural appeal. The Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) put out a college ad in Youth for Christ's magazine *Campus Life* entitled "REVOLUTION." It discussed the developments of the time but expressed reservations about some methods. Instead, the ad went, students should devote their energies for change towards individual transformation by enrolling in BIOLA.<sup>78</sup> Evangelicals liked the language of liberation and revolution even while demurring from corresponding movements. They had idealism and moral clarity. Transformative rhetoric could attract new people and energize believers. There was the belief that social change came from individual commitments to Christianity. The editors

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 4-6.

<sup>76</sup> Arthur Versluis, *American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 149-152.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 153-155.

<sup>78</sup> Axel R. Schäfer, *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, Kindle ed. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), location 1401-1416.

of *Campus Life* also sought to foster global awareness and raise a new generation of Christian leaders. This was amidst a battle between good and evil.<sup>79</sup> In this sense, social change was linked with God. It could be argued that the commandment, “There will be one law for the stranger and the native,” could be applied against racial discrimination. Of course, there is the biblical context and limited scope of that phrase, but it demonstrates an egalitarian value, just as the Bible warns against favoring the poor or great. Religious individuals did not necessarily need to stand apart from the currents of the 1960s. They could make use of them in their own ways.

Amidst cultural change, liberal Protestantism declined in the 1960s. Congregationalism, Episcopalianism, and Presbyterianism experienced changes in theology and lower attendance. Historically, they contributed to America’s civil religion and were associated with upstanding citizenship. Values such as individualism, freedom, tolerance, and intellectual inquiry found their roots in these denominations. However, an emphasis on these features in liberal settings could detract from the loyalty, conformity, and commitment needed to maintain religious community over time. Further, politics and social action could replace religious content in services. Liberal Protestant aims became sufficiently enmeshed in the culture that people no longer saw the need to attend church.<sup>80</sup> In fact, liberal Protestants called to embrace secularism and cultural adaptation. Restrictions and disciplines were discarded and viewed with embarrassment. People became involved with causes instead.<sup>81</sup> Amidst this higher tension, denominations thrived. These groups’ values were more at odds with society’s and required adherence. As America became more liberal, some denominations became a hollow of themselves. The loosening of morals and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., location 1459, 1486.

<sup>80</sup> N. J. Demerath, “Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34, No. 4 (1995): 458, 460-461.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 464-465.

theology over the past decades had changed society enough to reap this.

### **Televangelism**

The last thread to follow up is the rise of conservative denominations. As covered, theological liberalism became mainstream by the 1920s, religion was unsettled by the Great Depression, it recovered in the 1950s, and then it took on new causes in the 1960s. However, this was overshadowed by decreased attendance and, while on the fringes, alternative religious practices emerged which represented a larger culture moving increasingly away from traditional monotheism. More trends would unfold, but the purpose of this thesis is to explore the transition from the dominance of traditional religion to a situation more recognizable today. Thus, in the 1970s, two conservative trends, televangelism and political activism, are explored.

Evangelicals draw from the Gospels an imperative to evangelize. Since the radio began to be used, religious figures have broadcast on it. Aimee Semple McPherson used it in President Hoover's time. Charles E. Coughlin did under Roosevelt. Then in 1944, the Mutual Broadcasting Company, the only network that sold airtime, made it difficult for evangelicals to book slots. From 1956 through the 1960s, they made breakthroughs. Evangelicals became dominant on the networks. They achieved this by soliciting donations from their audience to support this enjoyable content. Even on television this was done. By contrast, mainline Protestants and Catholics did not proselytize so widely and found asking for money on air in poor taste.<sup>82</sup> Another boon to evangelicals was a 1960 ruling by the Federal Communications Commission that there was no relationship between sustaining and public service time. Station owners now

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<sup>82</sup> Jeffrey K. Hadden, "The Rise and Fall of American Televangelism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527 (1993): 114-117.

sold time on Sundays to evangelicals and credited it as public interest. Mainline denominations tried to argue for free time unsuccessfully.

The videotape was another step forward for broadcasting. Prior to it, content had to be produced on multiple expensive copies of movie film. As a result, a limited number were made, aired, and circulated. The videotape allowed for coordinated, simultaneous content. As a result, three Christian television networks were launched in the late 1970s. Viewership would peak at 15.1 million households in 1986 before scandals reduced viewership by a third over the following years.<sup>83</sup> Communications networks and technology allowed evangelicals to spread their messages wide and far and they hit a golden period in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Liberal evangelizers also took advantage of technological advances. Norman Lear was not a clergy, but he did promote issues of civil religion in his television programs such as *All in the Family*. Freedom of speech and the exercise of religion were among topics he covered. He reflected a commitment among liberals to a diversity of opinion in American public life. He decried moral monopolizing of conservative evangelicals. He viewed them as an enemy who could wreck harm like Charles Coughlin did with his caustic words. In an academic essay entitled “Liberty and Its Responsibilities,” Lear still used Jesus as an exemplar to others. He symbolized tolerance, something Lear thought was threatened by the New Right, which in his view spouted hate and sometimes ethnocentrism. He used stereotypes to convey this point.<sup>84</sup> He could draw from other scholars’ past criticism. In the 1920s, following the Scopes trial, academics wrote of the danger of a faith that rejected logic and scientific discovery. After World War II, Richard Hofstadter characterized fundamentalism as mindless and hateful. By contrast,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 118-120, 122.

<sup>84</sup> L. Benjamin Rolsky, *The Rise and Fall of the Religious Left: Politics, Television, and Popular Culture in the 1970s and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 25, 27-29.

Lear's liberal religiosity centered on empathy, seeking transcendence in life, and pride in the welfare state to address social problems. He was nondenominational, although of Jewish upbringing. He described his connection with God while acknowledging what he did was not based on scripture or religious authority.<sup>85</sup> In all, Lear used television as a platform to address issues from a liberal perspective and offer critiques of conservative religion.

### **Religious Views on Abortion**

One hot issue with religious implications during the 1970s was abortion. In New York, Republicans led its legalization, including Governor Nelson Rockefeller. However, both parties were divided over the issue. The media portrayed being pro-life as a Catholic cause, although this was not accurate. Three Protestants led the fight in Michigan, including one liberal Democratic state legislator. A liberal Methodist with a husband who was a physician involved with Planned Parenthood led the campaign in Minnesota. Orthodox Jews joined the cause. Pro-life activists achieved victories in numerous states despite opposition from the Women's Rights Movement, the media, the medical and legal establishments, mainline Protestant denominations, and some political leaders in each party. In the late 1960s, in three years, 16 states had legalized some form of abortion. In 1971, 25 states considered legalizing abortion and not one bill passed.<sup>86</sup>

The pro-life movement originated not as a conservative backlash to *Roe v. Wade* but well before as a defense of the human rights of the unborn. It survived and grew not by relying on

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 30, 32, 34-35.

<sup>86</sup> Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade*, Kindle ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), location 197-216.

religious teaching or laws but rather the language of human value and constitutional rights. The pro-life movement's origins were with New Deal liberals' concern for the defenseless. Only when it butted heads with feminism after *Roe v. Wade* did it become a primarily conservative cause.<sup>87</sup> The politicization of social issues was one trend of the 1970s with both *Roe v. Wade* and later the campaigns of Jimmy Carter. Conservative political organizations would later emerge around social issues, and *Roe v. Wade* marks the inception of this trend.

Another aspect to the issue of abortion was adoption, which resulted from changing social mores in a less traditionally religious society. After World War II, there was no longer stigma around giving up one's child. Adopting families were screened and selected based on whether they wanted to raise a child and were in solid socioeconomic circumstances. On the other side, young, unwed mothers would go to homes where they could leave their baby. They would return with a story about a kidney infection. To quote author Ann Fessler, "Almost every graduating class had a girl who disappeared."<sup>88</sup> Part of the story behind this was that the baby-boom generation had looser views on premarital sex. Their children more likely than not engaged in it. At the same time, birth control and sex education were tightly guarded for fear they would promote sexual activity. As a result, there was a jump in premarital pregnancies and adoptions. From 1945 to 1973, 1.5 million babies were placed for adoption. Clergy promoted this option for unwed mothers, presumably when the couple refused to marry.<sup>89</sup> The relevance of this information is to demonstrate the generational effect a loosening of religious norms had. Today

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, location 237, 259.

<sup>88</sup> Ann Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*, Kindle ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), location 124-135.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, location 227-249.

with contraception and abortions, not as many women grapple with the choice to give up a child. Also, there is less stigma so a sizable portion of women become single mothers. With less religious guidance, youth made impactful decisions which led to many trying family situations. One can see the cost (including high divorce rates) in dysfunctional families of a society less committed to the values which are preconditions for strong parenting and marriages.

Last, on the issue of abortion, one can look at contemporaneous reactions to the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision to gain a sense of how religious figures viewed this development. Daniel A. Degnan, a Catholic clergy, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* about the ruling. He taught a seminar which covered the issue of abortion. He noted Thomas Aquinas who he said held “that law should not attempt to restrain all immoral acts, but only the graver ones.” Otherwise, intensive legal restrictions would harm the common good. Degnan, recognizing a plurality of views in America, hoped for compromise regarding a law. He summarized that *Roe v. Wade* held that abortion was a constitutional right of personal privacy and that no law could interfere with this for the first six months of a pregnancy. Only when a fetus was viable could the state intervene unless the pregnancy hampered the health of the mother, a criterion left broad enough to amount to the discretion of a physician. Degnan cited the view that the law should respect and protect human life, including a fetus. This hearkened to language of human and constitutional rights. He wanted to protect the fetus while allowing abortion in some cases. He felt the Supreme Court had taken out of his hands the ability to advocate on the issue in his state of New York. He wrote that the decision “reduces us” by reducing the value of a fetus. He disagreed that it was the Supreme Court’s role to decide this.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, abortion is not mentioned in the Constitution. This article demonstrates the diversity of opinions on the permissibility of

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<sup>90</sup> Daniel A. Degnan, “The Supreme Court as Moral Arbiter,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1973, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1973/03/10/90921957.html?pageNumber=31>.

abortions. Issues like this would serve to unite the religious across denominations.

### 1970s Religious Schisms

While there were new developments in the 1970s like televangelism and abortion, one trend from the 1960s continued: schisms. This was the case for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. It had a five-year battle over doctrine. *Christianity Today* expected 250,000 of 2.8 million to split into a new Lutheran denomination. Conservatives controlled the synod and expected under 100 congregations to leave. There was concern within the denomination over the creeping influence of theological liberalism. The synod pledged no school would teach that the Bible had errors. In 1970, the denomination's president, Jacob "Jack" A. O. Preus, appointed a committee to investigate teaching at Concordia Seminary, the world's largest Lutheran seminary. Moderates opposed this. In 1972, Preus issued theological guidelines which the majority of Concordia's teachers rejected. One teacher was dismissed under suspicion that he was teaching that some events of the Bible were not factual. In response, the American Association of Theological Schools placed Concordia on academic probation. In 1973, faculty members put out a 200-page statement asserting their faithfulness to the Bible, the Gospels, and their church. The synod wanted more: an explicit rejection of the historical-critical method. Also, conservatives were elected to virtually all major posts in the denomination. They went further in their battle with Concordia, including referring charges against its president, John H. Tietjen. In 1974, he was fired and moved on to Seminex.<sup>91</sup> The synod developed a pledge for Seminex graduates to certify them as ministers. Eight presidents refused to sign, representing 600,000 baptized

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<sup>91</sup> Edward E. Plowman, "Missouri Synod Lutherans: Talk of Schism," *Christianity Today* (August 1975): 31.

members in 1,300 congregations. The synod responded with a call to close Seminex and to regard it as outside the denomination. Also, it deemed a group of moderates, Evangelical Lutherans in Mission, schismatic.<sup>92</sup> In other denominations too, conservatives would exert their will. While liberal mainline denominations were weakening, religious conservatives were on the rise.

In the case of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern), however, liberals were in the majority. 255 churches of 4,200 sought to break away as a Continuing Presbyterian Church that was conservative in theology and socially. The person reporting this noted that this ran counter to mergers taking place between other denominations. Leaders of the offshoot hoped to attract as many as 300 or 400 congregations and then appeal to Northern Presbyterians and other Calvinist denominations. The church allowed dissidents to retain their properties to avoid a bitter split. Also, it committed to help minorities of those congregations remain affiliated. Some conservative pastors refused to leave the denomination even though they opposed liberal trends in it. Church critics held it had strayed from its Calvinist roots, undermined the Bible's authority, and took unacceptable stances on divorce, abortion, ecumenism, and the ordination of women. Northern Presbyterians had a similar split in the 1930s. One reverend described the division as a reaction to industrialization and social changes.<sup>93</sup> In all, polarization over religious and social issues lasted into the 1970s and foreshadowed the religious conservative political movement.

For all the larger trends noted, one study of "Middletown," a midwestern city, did not find changes in religiosity across generations. Residents felt optimistic about religion's future rather than that it was in decline. They contributed more money to their churches than their

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>93</sup> Edward B. Fiske, "Schism, But No Bitterness," *New York Times*, July 8, 1973, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1973/07/08/110175276.html?pageNumber=156>.

grandparents. The authors disagreed that families and religion were deteriorating even as rates of divorce, family violence, single parenthood, and voluntary childlessness rose. They argued that conditions were better than in the recent past. Families did not face Great Depression poverty. Women were not subordinated and children did not work in factories. Church attendance jumped from 20 percent in 1924 to over 50 percent in 1978. There were more churches. Religious beliefs had not changed significantly. The authors found signs of religious renewal.<sup>94</sup> Clearly, not all religious trends were negative and particularly among religious conservatives there was continued growth in numbers, like how Pentecostals prospered even during the Depression years. Also, religious trends were not spread evenly. Even today, the Bible Belt remains and parts of the country still have rejected theological liberalism. Much has changed over the years, but some places have stayed much the same.

### **Concluding Thought**

In conclusion, in considering why and how religious practice in America changed from the 1920s to the 1970s, one finds the impact of theological liberalism and loosening morals accompanying urbanization, the faith-shaking impact of the Great Depression and a secularizing shift towards reliance on government programs, renewed religious activity during and after World War II, pluralism and religious decline in the 1960s, and the emergence of politically conservative religious expansion in the 1970s. Over enough time and challenges, religious beliefs did change. Indeed, they have changed further since the period under study. As to what this means for America's relationship with God, one is left with the quandary of how God

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<sup>94</sup> Howard M. Bahr and Bruce A. Chadwick, "Religion and Family in Middletown, USA," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 47, No. 2 (1985): 407-409.

oversees tragedies and punishments and what one can make of them. The prosperity following World War II triggered a period of immense gratitude towards God. While televangelists experienced rises and falls, more religious content is available than ever before for those with interest. Religious conservatives have adopted ecumenism even while guarding their doctrines. There are religious politicians. While it is clear religious problems have emerged over the past century, the faithful have mobilized and are acting. By searching for God's will in history and acting for His sake in this day, hopefully a new chapter can be written about religious survival and thriving as has been a pattern throughout history.

## Conclusion

Why and how American religious practice changed from the 1920s to the 1970s has been the primary focus of this thesis. There were the causes leading into the 1920s, the turning point of the Great Depression, and the state of religious affairs after. The 1970s offered a preview of how religion would gain an increasing role in the political sphere. Perhaps the 2020s are taking a shift away from religious divides. Abortion is still a wedge issue but increasing numbers of conservatives and Republicans accept same-sex marriage. It has become more of an intraparty issue. There is ample opportunity to explore the period of the 1980s to the 2020s in future research.

America became less religious from the 1920s through the 1970s. The start of this was theological liberalism, the questioning of religious fundamentals such as the inerrancy and authorship of the Bible. In the past, Unitarians challenged the trinity, but they were on the fringes. By the late 1880s, people like Charles Augustus Briggs challenged orthodoxy from the pulpit. Whereas he was suspended from the Presbyterian Church, by the 1930s J. Gresham Machen was also forced out for arguing for traditional beliefs and against the permeation of modernism into the church. This trend towards theological liberalism could be tied to industrialization and urbanization. People were removed from religious communities and were consumed by technological innovations. Suddenly, people took fringe religious ideas under serious consideration.

The periods that set the stage for a religious turnabout were the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The existing literature simply does not focus on the fact that American religious practice declined between the 1880s and 1930s. No author poses a relationship, although the effects from the 1950s through the 2010s are explored by Robert Putnam. Researchers are left

observing a change in religious practice without knowing quite how or why it happened. That is what this thesis addresses.

Part of the impact of the Gilded Age on religion was the effect of politics on morality. This was a time known for corruption and nationalism.<sup>1</sup> As the Gilded Age transitioned into the Progressive Era, America took its manifest destiny to another level, seeking to spread Protestantism and civilization across the globe through imperial efforts in the Philippines and Latin America. There was a mix of industrializing forces at home jarring people from religion, and America's traditional view of itself as an exceptional nation under God. These forces competed with each other.

On the spectrum between modern and religious, President Benjamin Harrison lay in the middle. Privately, he was a devout man while publicly he espoused a civil religion of republicanism, representative elections, and humane capitalism.<sup>2</sup> On the edge of the religious side was Sarah F. Smiley, a northern Presbyterian preacher. She allied with more traditional preachers on social issues like alcohol abuse, but she argued that major parts of the Bible were allegorical.<sup>3</sup> A more traditional preacher was Dwight L. Moody, although he used mass media advertising. He avoided controversial statements and used personal experiences to convey religious messages. He travelled around evangelizing.<sup>4</sup> Henry Ward Beecher was a prominent theologically liberal preacher. He tuned his message to his audience, vaguely referring to the

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<sup>1</sup> Worth Robert Miller, "The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1, No. 1 (2002): 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> Charles W. Calhoun, "Civil Religion and the Gilded Age Presidency: The Case of Benjamin Harrison," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23, No. 4 (1993): 656-657.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Blum, "'Paul Has Been Forgotten': Women, Gender, and Revivalism during the Gilded Age," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 3, No. 3 (2004): 254-255.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce J. Evensen, "'It Is a Marvel to Many People': Dwight L. Moody, Mass Media, and the New England Revival of 1877," *The New England Quarterly* 72, No. 2 (1999): 262; George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture: A Brief History*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), 32.

Bible but happy to wax on about his own sense of ethics absent consistent scriptural references.<sup>5</sup> This sampling reviews the variety of places in which people stood between modernity and traditional Christianity.

Amidst winds of political reform, the more orthodox founded organizations like the Moody Bible Institute and the Young Men's Christian Association. Bible schools were a favorite initiative of Christians. On the other hand, a social gospel arose, addressing congregants' socioeconomic needs and tying religious messages with political reform efforts. World War I was a major cause across the religious spectrum and across religions. Churches fundraised, centralized, and reached a whole new scale.<sup>6</sup> However, during this time, urban culture made gains against religious customs: people smoked, drank, and danced with the opposite gender, and women wore slightly more revealing clothing (although still quite muted by the standards of the 2020s).<sup>7</sup>

One major response to the competition between modernism and traditional Christianity in the 1910s and 1920s was fundamentalism, the movement to defend the fundamentals of Christianity. Clarence Macartney was one defender, criticizing unbelief and hoping some theological liberals would repent. The biggest wrench to fundamentalism was the 1925 Scopes trial where a teacher was tried in Tennessee for using a textbook with content on evolution. When former Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan admitted in the course of prosecuting the teacher that God's creation of the world may not be six literal solar days, the press panned him and the fundamentalist cause, claiming victory. From the embarrassment of

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *The Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1869), 1-7.

<sup>6</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 896.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 915.

this moment, fundamentalists would retract from the public sphere until the 1940s.

With these dynamics of the preceding decades in mind, the Great Depression and 1930s saw a drop in religious attendance, in part due to affordability amidst an economic collapse. Instead of turning to God, many turned to the government. No longer were these the days of Harrison. Now Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration was in power and it had a secular bent that deemphasized religion.<sup>8</sup> Also, minority religious groups were affected. Catholics struggled to maintain their schools and Jews supported their synagogues less. Adversity and urban influences thawed out America's religious character somewhat during these years. This helps to explain why American religious practice changed.

Religion had a much more prominent place in society in 1929 than 2022. The *New York Times* had a sermons page including church news. However, economic struggles meant more doing it oneself at home. The birth rate dropped during this time. Children grew up in harder, less fruitful environments in both material and spiritual terms. Meanwhile, it seemed government leaders were not doing enough, and religious leaders were just as uncertain as their congregants. Some took the Depression to be a result of national sinfulness, i.e., the trends of the previous decades as discussed. A few religious figures gained prominence during these years, such as James Cannon, Jr. and Charles Coughlin. Religious institutions, such as the Bible Institute of Los Angeles used publications to evangelize. Preachers faced less of an adjustment than the common person because they could tie in events with their messages. This did not blunt the economic struggles of families. As with the social gospel, some ministers were motivated to advocate for political reforms, like Gerald L. K. Smith. He was a national organizer for Senator Huey Long's

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Isetti, "The Moneychangers of the Temple: FDR, American Civil Religion, and the New Deal," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, No. 3 (1996): 678.

Share Our Wealth initiative.<sup>9</sup> Still, religion and religious community could be a comfort to some.

The exception to the general religious downturn during the Great Depression was Pentecostalism. Some took a millennialist view that the corruption of the Church was related to the Depression. Catholics did not fare as well. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference advocated for issues around farming and agriculture. Farmers had faced a long depression even preceding the stock market crash due to low food prices from surplus goods. However, the organization lacked practical solutions in terms of the ownership these individuals needed to participate in its initiatives. Ultimately, Catholics put their reliance on Roosevelt, voting in large numbers for his program which included governmental aid to agriculture.<sup>10</sup> Bishop Joseph Schrembs even sought government funds for religious schools. Pope Leo XIII issued *The Condition of Labor*, addressing working conditions during this difficult time. Clergy decried sweatshops for their use of child labor. In all, Catholics were not able to find sufficiency in their own organizations, turning to the government. That said, some did speak to the issues facing many Americans.

Jews faced similar religious challenges. People stopped attending synagogue. Individuals rose high in the government and other sectors but could not influence policies. Synagogue staffs shrank. Many Jewish youth received no religious education, even as little as learning the Hebrew alphabet. Generally, though, there was advocacy for greater sabbath observance.<sup>11</sup> Economic adversity had a major impact on Jewish religious activity in America.

With the Great Depression's impact on religious activity in mind, one can appreciate how

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<sup>9</sup> Glen Jeansonne, "Arkansas's Minister of Hate: A Research Odyssey," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 59, No. 4 (2000): 429.

<sup>10</sup> David S. Bovée, *The Church and the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923-2007* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 85, 89, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 170, 173-176, 181-182.

government programs affected religious outlook. Industrial workers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers were most hurt by the economic downturn. Some government agencies made matters worse, such as when tenant farmers were forced off the land on which they worked by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration.<sup>12</sup> Other programs helped, such as the National Industrial Recovery Act, which ushered in working standards for industrial workers. Their main impact was overshadowing any religious message. Whatever was said at church, a law forcing industries to improve conditions meant more. Likewise, the government forcing people off of their land changed people's lives for the worse more than any religious community could help. Religious organizations did try to help through charity. And the impact of their work was not negligible. The Salvation Army, for example, raised money to support veterans, including providing new equipment to their facilities.<sup>13</sup> However, the change in the role of government outweighed the authority of traditional religious figures.

Where churches still had a strong voice was on national policies, such as the stance America should take in the event of war. The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America called for the country to join the League of Nations, as opposed to the general sentiment to remain isolationist. When World War II began, this organization advocated pacifism. As context, in the 1930s, almost all Protestant denominations declared war a sin.<sup>14</sup> Catholics and Lutherans were the most militant, although Catholics opposed conscription.<sup>15</sup> What unified religious

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<sup>12</sup> James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 12.

<sup>13</sup> "Salvationists Ask Fund," *New York Times*, December 22, 1945, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/12/22/305215342.html?pageNumber=17>.

<sup>14</sup> Ray H. Abrams, "The Churches and the Clergy in World War II," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 256 (1948): 111-112.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia McNeal, "Catholic Conscientious Objection during World War II," *The Catholic Historical Review* 61, No. 2 (1975): 222-223.

opinion on the war was the same as what unified American opinion: Pearl Harbor.

Another place where religion's influence permeated was on the battlefield. Chaplains provided religious services, counseling, and morale. One area where some tried to persuade soldiers was alcohol use.<sup>16</sup> Also, there was a Jewish presence. Orthodox chaplains generally became more lenient whereas Reform ones became more observant. Because Jewish soldiers were scattered, their chaplains could hold services as far as 15 miles apart. They also reached out to Jews in Europe.<sup>17</sup> Chaplains were colleagues even though they had different religions. While their liturgies varied, their basic task remained the same: to steady soldiers from the rigors of war. Chaplains played a valued role during World War II, and they demonstrated the persistence of religion as an important facet of American life.

Even when Japanese Americans were interned, missionaries were present. The government took a religiously neutral stance, however. Whatever a person's religion, one would be able to practice it. Evangelizing and inflammatory rhetoric were not permitted. There were other restrictions. Catholics could not raise a parochial school. There were not private areas for prayer and Bible study.<sup>18</sup> Conditions at internment camps revealed the differing impulses of the Roosevelt administration and religious leaders.

Missionaries would not only move to remote sites to tend to internees. They also conducted global missions, such as in New Guinea. Being in such a remote location carried risks. In 1942, international evangelists were captured by the Japanese. Suddenly, their activities shifted from helping locals to supporting each other. Their efforts made clear that while there

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<sup>16</sup> Jenel Virden, "Warm Beer and Cold Canons: US Army Chaplains and Alcohol Consumption in World War II," *Journal of American Studies* 48, No. 1 (2014): 80, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Philip S. Bernstein, "Jewish Chaplains in World War II," *The American Jewish Year Book* 47 (1945): 174-175.

<sup>18</sup> Anne M. Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice, and the Japanese American Incarceration during World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 100, 102-103, 106-107.

were general religious trends leading up to World War II, there was not one unified decline. Even in difficult circumstances, Americans stepped up to spread Christianity.

As these examples from World War II indicate, while the 1930s saw a decline in religiosity, the 1950s experienced an upsurge. The Cold War made Christianity and monotheism rallying cries against Soviet atheism. The conflict was viewed as a competition between two forms of civilization. In conjunction with this, there was an increase in church attendance.<sup>19</sup> President Truman called for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to unite. The government painted the Cold War as a battle between good and evil. President Eisenhower courted religious leaders to support his foreign policy and was the first president to pray at his inaugural address.<sup>20</sup> Catholics, such as national security expert Edmund A. Walsh, were particularly anti-communist. Foreign policy prompted religion to take on a new expanded role which influenced the 1950s.

There were a number of efforts that promoted religion as a form of American patriotism. President Eisenhower wanted a spiritual crusade. Notably, he became much more religious in office than he had been previously, including being baptized.<sup>21</sup> He saw self-government and human rights as part of God's design. Billy Graham, the famous evangelist, held revivals. One at Yankee Stadium was the largest evangelical meeting as of 1957.<sup>22</sup> Edward L. R. Elson led a prominent Presbyterian church in Washington, D.C., which preached to government officials, and later he became Chaplain to the United States Senate. Youth for Christ was an evangelical

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<sup>19</sup> Lee Canipe, "Under God and Anti-Communist: How the Pledge of Allegiance Got Religion in Cold War America," *Journal of Church and State* 45, No. 2 (2003): 313.

<sup>20</sup> James C. Wallace, "A Religious War?: The Cold War and Religion," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, No. 3 (2013): 167-168.

<sup>21</sup> David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Postwar Presidents: From Truman to Obama* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 36.

<sup>22</sup> "Billy Graham's 1957 New York Crusade Sermon at Yankee Stadium," Billy Graham Classics, posted on July 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aZoqIwHsdM>.

organization that established a network of young men with a common interest in religious life. It held massive events and eventually spread internationally. These were all factors in America's religious recovery.

Complications to the religious picture of the 1950s included splits between conservatives and liberals, between fundamentalists and evangelicals, and over Israel. Bible schools emerged to teach a fundamentalist way of life. Backers, such as J. Howard Pew of Sun Oil Company who supported Fuller Theological Seminary, promoted conservative principles, such as the free market. Billy Graham was a leader in the split between evangelicals and fundamentalists as some sought to avoid fundamentalism's negative connotations.<sup>23</sup> Some Christians saw the founding of a modern state of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy while others were critical of Zionism. That religious attendance increased did not mean that the 1950s were without controversy.

The effects of theological liberalism could not be undone and were at this time put into law by the Supreme Court. Voluntary religious classes were banned from schools, even if they took place outside of a school building. A nondenominational prayer to God was struck down, as were daily Bible readings. This trend of laws against religion and the Bible has continued to this day, ranging from the Pledge of Allegiance being declared unconstitutional by a federal circuit court for its phrase "under God" to the Supreme Court ruling contrary to the Bible that it finds no issue with same-sex relations.<sup>24</sup> One must question where America is heading in religious terms when laws are passed and rulings are enforced that hamper devout individuals' ability to follow the Bible.

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<sup>23</sup> George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 158-162.

<sup>24</sup> Vincent Phillip Munoz, *Religious Liberty and the American Supreme Court: The Essential Cases and Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 1, 3-5.

The present-day implications of this are an area of policy and religion more than history and religion. One point of focus for research would be the challenging of bedrock American principles like American exceptionalism, manifest destiny, and religious tolerance. The settlement of America by Europeans both represented the establishment of Christian pluralism on a greater scale than ever before and had echoes of God instructing Israel to conquer Canaan because of its idolatry and abominable practices. While being critical of past actions can bring better conditions for people, at present there is a danger of ignoring the role of religion in American history. Native Americans enslaved, warred, and scalped as did Europeans. At least some tribes practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism.<sup>25</sup> And recent research attributes Native American population decline primarily to disease, which wiped out 95 percent.<sup>26</sup> While COVID makes clear the tragedy of deaths by disease, one should not condone certain Native American practices as one criticizes certain colonial ones. It is important that history presents a balanced perspective, not a political one. In addition, given the less secular perspective of the 1600s and 1700s, it is historical to consider the conquest of the United States from a religious perspective. While the term “savage” can be view as racial, it can also be viewed as religious. Criticizing the removal of a victim’s heart to put on an altar as savage, as Hernan Cortes witnessed, hopefully would not be construed as racist. It is religious because the Bible teaches the value of human life and demarcates acceptable and prohibited conduct (particularly as applies to Jews). One reason religious history is important is that it promotes a more historical perspective, i.e., the viewpoint of most Europeans, albeit not all were equally devout and many were not. The key, as this thesis studies, is thinking that challenged the basics of Christianity was significantly more on the

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 103.

margins of society until the late 1880s in America. The ebbing of American principles that are tied with a religious viewpoint and the link between this and the secularization of society are areas ripe for further scholarly discussion.

While challenges to religion proliferated in the 1960s, there were a number of obstacles in the 1950s as well. Some university faculties were not supportive of devout students. Alternative theologies circulated such as existentialism, atheism, and neoorthodoxy. People claimed contact with extraterrestrials. Idolatrous, or non-monotheistic, religions permeated America. In the 1950s, the seeds of a counterculture were planted.

The 1960s were denominational. Some thought salvation was exclusive to their denomination. Congregations provided community for their members. Denominations did not interact with each other often. Not all were open to hearing a minister from another denomination preach. Denominationalism went as far as schisms in the Episcopal Church. Christians still saw one another for their differences rather than their shared values.

Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy played a major role in promoting religious tolerance. He became the first Catholic elected president. He emphasized his belief in the separation of church and state. He noted America's religious liberty. He promised to govern by the Constitution. By addressing the religious issue, unlike his predecessor, Al Smith, Kennedy overcame objections to his candidacy and started a trend of accepting religious differences.

The Catholic Church also made statements on religion. It said religion should not be coerced, while the Church would support people who sought truth. It accepted what was considered wisdom in non-monotheistic religions. It encouraged peace and camaraderie between the different monotheistic religions. The 1960s marked a turning point in the attitudes of the Catholic Church.

During the 1960s, churches espoused civil rights. The National Council of Churches was a strong advocate. The United Presbyterian Church also committed itself. Pastors like Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were leaders in this area. King railed against conformism in regard to racism. Religious figures gained authority on civil rights when other community leaders such as principals and college presidents evaded conflict. Some took the issue as a starting point, expanding to a new social gospel of policies to help the poor. While a number of youth rejected religion in the 1960s, churches still used their voices and resources to impact society.

Many Mainline Protestant denominations declined during the 1960s. Among African Americans, a small group turned to Islam. Likewise, some youth took interest in Hinduism and Buddhism. The Bible Institute of Los Angeles made a countercultural appeal in an advertisement. Theologies were changed and fewer people attended church. Religious restrictions were viewed critically. It was the more stringent denominations that avoided these negative trends and even grew.

In the 1970s, televangelism benefitted conservative denominations. Ambitious ministers bought airtime on Sundays to appeal to mass audiences. Videotapes allowed for the mass circulation of content, allowing it to be viewed simultaneously for the first time. There were religious liberals who produced television content, such as Norman Lear, producer of *All in the Family*. In all, new technology allowed for traditionally religious content to become more dominant.

The 1970s also witnessed religious opinions on social issues such as abortion. Abortion originally was not a strictly conservative issue. Liberals saw it as a chance to protect the defenseless. Pro-life advocates actually used constitutional rather than religious language and appeals, although this was an important issue to the religious. It was feminist arguments

following *Roe v. Wade* that spurred a political divide.<sup>27</sup> In practice, the baby-boom generation had looser views on premarital sex, but adults withheld birth control and sex education from youth out of fear they would promote sexual activity. As a result, from 1945 to 1973, 1.5 million babies were placed for adoption.<sup>28</sup> Today, there is no longer the same stigma for single mothers or those who choose to abort. The issue of abortion shows how much American sensibilities have changed from the past.

In all, this thesis addresses how religious practice in America changed from the 1920s to the 1970s, including the complexities. There were general trends but also notable exceptions. Instead of only covering the trend towards secularism, this research demonstrates how it came about in the first place. It links a distant period of America's past with the past few generations, revealing the stages in which America transformed. Religion is too often overlooked in contemporary discussions about history. God is omitted from the classroom and political agendas take precedence over the fact that many historical figures were informed by their Christian faith. This thesis aims to put the importance of religion in history back on the map, as one reads just how much America has changed in this regard.

As mentioned, one step forward for future research would be to study why political issues that were central to the religious in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s no longer command the same commitment in the 2020s. Why do more conservatives accept abortion and same-sex relations now than a generation ago? In addition, research could be done in earlier periods of American history. Many slaves came from pagan nations. Their experience with Christianity and the lack of commitment of most slaveowners to evangelizing them would show the complicated picture

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<sup>27</sup> Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade*, Kindle ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), location 237, 259.

<sup>28</sup> Ann Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*, Kindle ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), location 227-249.

of evangelical efforts. While this thesis explores changes in religious practice, research could also focus on changes in theology. What made the Mainline Protestant denominations change their theology? Also, how have opinions on different denominations and religions changed throughout American history? The area of religion in history is ripe with questions and curiosities. While this thesis addresses why American religious practice has changed, there is much more to explore and discover.

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