

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Since the dissemination of the classic theoretical treatises of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, sociologists—and many other social scientists—have widely assumed that the forces of modernity would erode the social power of religion. In the prevailing secularization narrative, processes such as social differentiation and rationalization would prompt a retreat of religion from the public sphere, resulting in religious privatism and eventual decline (Tschannen, 1991). Such ideas dominated the sociological landscape for most of the 20th century, and secularization theory continues to have its defenders (e.g., Chaves, 1994), especially among many European sociologists (e.g., Bruce, 2002). Beginning in the late 1980s, however, notions of secularization came under harsh scrutiny by a growing number of U.S. sociologists who were increasingly skeptical about the relevance of this perspective to the U.S. experience (Hadden, 1987; Stark, 1999).

Several factors fueled this reconsideration, including (a) evidence regarding continued high rates of religious affiliation, practice, and belief; (b) high rates of financial giving to religious groups and the significant role of faith communities in the nonprofit and voluntary sector; (c) the ongoing emergence of new religious groups, including schismatic movements and so-called cults; and (d) the visibility of religion in social and political movements, including the Christian Right (Hadden, 1987). In light of these and other developments, many U.S. sociologists and other observers have come to view the U.S. religious landscape as a marketplace in which individuals shop and choose their

religion and in which religious groups compete for members and other resources (Warner, 1993). Although some scholars employed such concepts loosely, others drew more heavily on economic approaches, notably “rational choice” perspectives (Stark & Finke, 2001).

In the 21st century, contrary to the expectations of some variants of secularization theory, the United States is regarded as one of the most religious societies in the industrial West. Although economic development and national wealth are inversely related to religiousness throughout much of the world, the United States remains a stubborn outlier (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). In contrast to widespread popular and scholarly understandings of the nation’s founding, it is now believed that much of the United States was relatively irreligious during the early years of the Republic (Finke & Stark, 1992). The importance of religion increased rapidly in the decades that followed, however, as recognized by Tocqueville during his visit to the United States in the 1840s, and by many observers thereafter. Nevertheless, some observers detect signs of possible secularization on the contemporary scene and looming on the U.S. horizon. Our chapter has three main objectives: (a) to assess patterns and trends in religious affiliation in the contemporary United States, (b) to explore correlates of religious participation and religious and spiritual beliefs, and (c) to identify recent developments and current trends that may reshape the religious and spiritual landscape in the United States over the coming years.

Three caveats should be noted at this point. First, this chapter necessarily provides a broad and selective overview of these complex phenomena. Many important sociological debates can be presented only in limited fashion. Given the need to restrict our focus, and the fact that a large majority of U.S. adults are Christian or formerly Christian, in the first major sections of the chapter, we concentrate primarily—but not exclusively—on developments within this tradition. In the final section, we return, albeit briefly, to the topic of the growth of non-Christian religions within the United States.

A second issue involves the distinction between *religion* and *spirituality*. Briefly, we should note that there are competing definitions and meanings of these terms that are a perennial source of confusion; on this score, imprecision reigns, and there are important political and value judgments that can underlie this distinction (Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). *Religion* often refers to institutional allegiances and practices. *Spirituality*, on the other hand, often is characterized in terms of engagement with, or experience of, the transcendent. Thus, whereas the meaning of religion is often confined to matters of group identity, organizational participation, and acceptance of doctrines, spirituality frequently takes on a broader meaning, implying interior engagement with the transcendent, including nonorganizational practices and personal experiences (see Chapter 1 in this volume). For a majority of U.S. adults, “religiousness” and “spirituality” are closely linked. To some extent, however, there has clearly been a decoupling of these two phenomena, and it appears that growing numbers of Americans identify themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” In the interests of clarity, the distinction between religion and spirituality will be downplayed until the final section of the chapter, where it will receive closer attention.

A third issue concerns the availability and quality of data on U.S. religion (Sherkat, 2010). In contrast to the situation in many other countries, the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect any information on religion. This was not always the case. Between 1850 and 1936 the U.S. Census Bureau attempted—with varying degrees of breadth and sophistication—to gather data on religious affiliations and congregations

across the United States. Following the collapse of these efforts, religious researchers affiliated with several denominations and other organizations—under the auspices of the Glenmary Research Institute—have cooperated in an ongoing initiative to collect data on congregations and religious group membership in the United States (Bradley, Green, Jones, Lynn, & McNeil, 1992; Johnson, Picard, & Quinn, 1974; Jones et al., 2002; Quinn, Anderson, Bradley, Goetting, & Shriver, 1982). Although they remain limited in important ways, the scope and accuracy of these efforts have improved with each iteration. Our estimates of denominational membership are derived from the Glenmary project and correctives thereof (Finke & Scheitle, 2005). On the other hand, data on the religious participation and beliefs of U.S. adults can be obtained only from major surveys on the basis of nationwide probability samples, the best of which are the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Social Surveys (GSS; Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2008) and the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS; Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001). Unless otherwise indicated, figures cited in this chapter are based on these sources.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND IDENTITY: PATTERNS AND SOCIAL SOURCES

It is estimated that 50% to 60% of U.S. adults report that they are actually members of a religious congregation and that at least 80% maintain a religious identity, preference, or affinity with some religious tradition (Davis et al., 2008; Kosmin et al., 2001). The overwhelming majority of U.S. adults identify with some branch of the Christian faith, even if they are not currently involved in the practice of that faith. On the basis of estimates from these data sources, what follows is a rough breakdown of the religious loyalties of the U.S. adult population: Approximately 30% of U.S. adults self-identify with conservative (i.e., fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic) Protestant groups. Although there are significant differences among the various branches of conservative Protestantism, and among specific groups within each branch, in their histories, worship styles, and some specific beliefs, they tend to share several important core tenets, such as biblical

inerrancy, original sin, and the imperative of individual salvation through acceptance of divine grace (Hempel & Bartkowski, 2008; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). Official doctrinal statements of most conservative Protestant groups endorse many of the tenets known as “the twelve fundamentals,” a set of orthodox Protestant doctrines outlined in the early 20th century (Hunter, 1983).

Among the major conservative Protestant bodies are the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC; the largest Protestant denomination), Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Wesleyan, Evangelical Free Church, Bible Churches, and numerous other fundamentalist and evangelical groups. This broad category also includes charismatic groups such as the Assemblies of God (the largest Pentecostal body), the Churches of God, the Church of God in Christ, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, all other Pentecostal and Holiness churches, and the many independent charismatic churches (Roof & McKinney, 1987; Smith, 1990; Steensland et al., 2000). High-end estimates of conservative Protestant market share would also include persons who belong to the growing number of nondenominational churches and fellowships, many of which are broadly conservative in theological orientation (Steensland et al., 2000). Furthermore, among predominantly African American denominations and churches, there are signs that the more conservative groups—especially the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), a major Pentecostal body—and sectarian faiths, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, are gaining members at the expense of more traditional Baptist and Methodist (e.g., African Methodist Episcopal [A.M.E.]) denominations (Ellison & Sherkat, 1990; Sherkat, 2002; see also Chapter 30 in this volume).

According to GSS and ARIS estimates, approximately 12% to 15% of U.S. adults express a preference for mainline (i.e., moderate and liberal) Protestant denominations. Specific groups within this camp include the following: the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church USA (and most other Presbyterian churches, but not the neo-Calvinist Presbyterian Church in America), most variants of Lutheranism (particularly the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, but not

the Missouri or Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, which are conservative Protestant groups), the United Church of Christ (or Congregationalist), and the Disciples of Christ. Although these groups differ from one another in terms of their histories, they generally reject many conservative Protestant teachings, and they also have moved to embrace more moderate or liberal views on many theological and social issues.

Roughly 25% of U.S. adults express a preference for Roman Catholicism; however, many persons who self-identify as Catholics, or who are counted by the Church as members, are not active members. Much smaller proportions report ties to (a) sectarian Christian groups, such as the Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as (b) various religious groups that are difficult to categorize within most established classification schemes, such as the Unitarian Universalists, various Anabaptist groups (e.g., Friends, Mennonites), and new religious movements. Roughly 5% of U.S. adults now express preferences for non-Christian world faiths, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among others. Finally, approximately 15% to 20% of U.S. adults now express no religious preference at all on surveys, although many of these adults continue to hold traditional religious beliefs.

At one time in the early to mid-20th century, nearly all Americans were raised with a religious preference, and although survey data before the 1960s are limited, it is widely believed that most adults retained their religion of origin throughout their lives. This is no longer the case. Indeed, since the 1960s, observers have pointed to considerable fluidity and voluntarism as key features of the U.S. religious marketplace.

Which form of religion or spirituality to identify with, or indeed, whether to identify with one at all, are increasingly matters of choice not ascription. An estimated 40% to 50% of U.S. adults will switch their religious allegiance at least once during their lifetime. Although many persons may switch religions more than once, data on such multiple switchers are scarce and unreliable (Roof, 1989). According to many observers, Americans increasingly employ a market-oriented logic in the arena of religion, shopping for churches much as they might shop for other consumer products.

Regional Factors

One of the key features of the U.S. religious scene is its sheer diversity, at least when viewed in aggregate terms. America is home to several thousand specific religious denominations and faith traditions (Jones et al., 2002). Using economic imagery, one might say that low barriers to entry and limited government regulation in the United States allow for the entry of new religious entrepreneurs and firms with few constraints. Although the Glenmary data and major surveys reveal the existence of many different religious groups within the United States, not all local communities are religiously diverse. To be sure, major metropolitan areas, and especially the leading “gateway cities” for immigration (i.e., New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington, Honolulu, San Francisco, Houston), host large numbers of faiths, including non-Judeo-Christian world religions. Furthermore, much of the mid-Atlantic and Midwestern United States is characterized by the presence of (and competition among) numerous Christian denominations. A significant proportion of the more than 3,000 U.S. counties are dominated by adherents of one or a small number of denominations (e.g., Catholic, Southern Baptist, Mormon; Jones et al., 2002). Although religious diversity is slowly coming to many of these areas, these patterns of religious concentration and cultural hegemony at the local and regional levels carry important implications for the texture of social life and public discourse and for the potential for religious prejudice and conflict.

For nearly a century, researchers have observed that religious denominations differ widely in terms of their regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition (Niebuhr, 1929; Roof & McKinney, 1987). Although there are signs that these “social sources of denominationalism” may be waning—due to intergenerational mobility, intermarriage, geographic relocation, and other leavening influences—they remain relevant in the 21st century (Park & Reimer, 2002). For example, Catholicism remains the dominant faith in several specific areas of the United States, including the following: (a) New England and much of the Northeast; (b) areas of the upper Midwest; (c) the Southwest, including California and the U.S.–Mexico border states; and

(d) areas of Louisiana and Texas along the Gulf Coast. Members of several mainline Protestant denominations—such as the United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA, and Episcopal Church—are disproportionately likely to reside in the Northeast and parts of the Midwest. Although early colonists and planters in the Low Country areas of the Southeast primarily embraced Anglicanism (the Church of England), the South and the lower Midwest are heavily populated by adherents of conservative Protestant religions, which had consolidated social and cultural dominance of these areas by the mid-19th century (Boles, 1985; Finke & Stark, 1989). The Wesleyan tradition, from which the United Methodist Church emerged, competed vigorously with the Baptist faith for adherents in much of the South during the 19th century, but a series of changes in church culture and structure tipped the balance in favor of the Baptists by the early decades of the 20th century (Finke & Stark, 1992). Other conservative Protestant churches, such as the (fundamentalist) Church of Christ and the Assemblies of God, are also disproportionately popular in South Central and lower Midwest regions. One important development since the 1970s has been the spread of conservative Protestantism to areas outside the southern United States (Park & Reimer, 2002).

Other regional patterns are also noteworthy. The Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have been the dominant cultural force in Utah for more than a century; recent decades have seen striking increases in the prevalence of Mormonism in several neighboring areas of the Mountain West (Idaho, Wyoming, and eastern parts of Washington and Oregon; Bradley et al., 1992; Jones et al., 2002; Quinn et al., 1982). Institutional religion has long been weakest in parts of the Mountain West (far northern Idaho) and the Pacific Rim (northern California, Oregon, and Washington), which were among the last-settled areas of the United States. In the 21st century, these locales have low levels of religious participation and a disproportionate shares of unchurched and “spiritual but not religious” residents (Bainbridge, 1990). Jewish Americans also tend to be regionally concentrated. The Jewish population is disproportionately urban and bicoastal. Although there are large Jewish

areas in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, among others, Jews have not been the dominant religious group in any U.S. county. The only partial exception to this statement is the case of Palm Beach County, Florida, in which Jews constituted the single largest religious grouping according to the 1990 Glenmary estimates. By 2000, however, increases in the numbers of Catholics (particularly Latinos, but also European American migrants from other parts of the United States) eliminated this Jewish plurality (Bradley et al., 1992; Jones et al., 2002).

Many patterns of geographic concentration closely track the historical immigration of specific ethnic groups (Grammich, 2005). For example, the large percentages of Catholics in the Northeast and Midwest partly reflect the migration histories of Irish and subsequent immigrant streams from southern and eastern Europe (e.g., Italian, Polish, etc.). Catholic dominance elsewhere is bound up with Hispanic (particularly Mexican American), French-speaking Acadian (Cajun), and other ethnic cultures. There are other examples of the lingering confluence of regional religious concentrations and ethnic heritage. Lutheranism continues to prevail in many rural areas of Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana, reflecting the continuing influence of Scandinavian and German heritage in that region. Pockets of Dutch settlement in western Michigan and Iowa remain home to concentrations of adherents of the Reformed tradition, including the Christian Reformed Church. Despite intergenerational mobility, intermarriage, and other leavening influences, many other examples of the persistent connection between ethnic heritage and religion abound (e.g., Nemeth & Luidens, 1995). Furthermore, perhaps because of the abundance of religious supply in the United States, immigrant groups from some less religious countries of origin have tended to exhibit increases in religiousness across three generations, as part the assimilation process (Stark, 1997).

Socioeconomic Factors

Socioeconomic status (SES) has long varied along denominational lines. Throughout much of U.S. history, adherents of mainline (and especially liberal) Protestant faiths (e.g., Episcopal, Presbyterian

Church USA, United Church of Christ) have tended to have higher levels of formal education and wealth and have been disproportionately likely to hold prestigious positions in business and the professions (Niebuhr, 1929; Roof & McKinney, 1987). This has also been the case with Jews (especially Reform Jews) since the mid 20th century. By contrast, as a group, conservative Protestants traditionally have lagged behind most other Americans on these socioeconomic indicators. At least part of this differential may reflect the longstanding concentration of fundamentalists and evangelicals in the South, which was largely rural and economically underdeveloped before the 1960s. Thus, there were minimal education opportunities or incentives for many conservative Protestants of earlier generations, whose prospects were limited by lack of education access, diffusion of resources among numerous siblings, and familial need for agricultural labor. The subsequent industrial and economic boom in the region and the expansion of opportunities for higher education beginning in the 1950s significantly changed these patterns (Massengill, 2008). For example, according to GSS data, among conservative Protestants, the ratio of high school dropouts to college-educated adherents was 10:1 in 1972; by 1996, this figure was 1:1, in large part because of cohort replacement (i.e., older, less educated cohorts died off and were replaced by cohorts with greater access to, and rewards for, education attainment; Davis et al., 2008). Nevertheless, conservative Protestants continue to trail their more moderate and liberal counterparts in education attainment (Massengill, 2008) as well as in other important socioeconomic indicators, including wages, early adult wealth accumulation, and occupational attainment (Keister, 2011; Lehrer, 2008).

Although Catholics tended to have relatively low levels of education and economic standing throughout much of the past 150 years, these patterns have largely reflected the confounding influences of nativity (U.S. born vs. foreign born) and generational status among those of European American ancestry. Whereas first-generation non-Hispanic White Catholic immigrants often arrived with low levels of education and were consigned to low-skill, low-prestige jobs, the upward mobility of recent

cohorts has been facilitated by distinctive patterns of education, marriage, and fertility as well as Catholic religious values with regard to work and money (Keister, 2011). Hispanic Catholic immigrants exhibit particularly low average levels of SES; however, given the current constraints imposed by economic and political conditions, it remains to be seen whether they and future generations of Latino Catholics will be able to experience upward mobility in education and earnings.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND IDENTITY

The American religious scene is both highly diverse and fluid. Over the past half-century the fortunes of several major religious bodies have shifted dramatically, for a wide range of possible reasons. The sections that follow outline several of these key changes as well as prominent explanations for them.

Conservative Protestant Gains, Mainline Losses

One of the most striking developments over the past several decades has been the strong growth of conservative Protestant and sectarian religious groups, and the concomitant decline of the more liberal mainline Protestant bodies. A few examples, derived from Glenmary data, illustrate these disparate patterns. Between 1970 and 2000, the estimated number of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) adherents increased by a striking 98%. The numbers of Southern Baptists rose by 37.5% during the same period, although there is evidence that membership had started to plateau around 2000 (Lindner, 2011). Between 1980 and 2000, the estimated number of adherents to the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal body, grew by roughly 59% (1970 data were unavailable). The Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal groups have demonstrated robust growth during the early 2000s as well (Lindner, 2011). On the other hand, the estimated number of adherents in the United Church of Christ declined by 24.5%; losses over the same period for two other mainline Protestant churches, the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church, were 23% and 10%, respectively. Additional mainline losses have been

recorded during the 2000–2010 period (Lindner, 2011). And although these are predominantly (non-Hispanic) White denominations, there are clear indications of a conservative Protestant surge among African Americans and Latinos as well. What factors account for these divergent trends in denominational growth? Several sets of explanations have been proposed, and social scientists remain far from consensus on this issue.

One perspective has focused on differences in the organizational cultures of conservative versus liberal religious groups, emphasizing that conservative Protestant and sectarian churches often are characterized by two key features: (a) strictness, or the inclination to demand doctrinal and behavioral compliance with group norms, and (b) social solidarity, or the tendency to encourage insular networks and shared sacrifice for group objectives (Kelley, 1972). According to Iannaccone (1994), conservative religious communities often impose “sacrifice and stigma,” in the form of demands for regular worship attendance and other types of participation, tithing, and perhaps compliance with other lifestyle guidelines. More liberal religions, such as mainline Protestant churches, usually eschew such demands, and are more inclined to accept differences among members in commitment, doctrinal belief, and lifestyle. Iannaccone and others maintain that the strictness of conservative religions has two desirable effects: (a) It weeds out “free riders,” or lukewarm members who would otherwise dilute the energy of these groups; and (b) among those who choose to remain, strictness also promotes compliance, monitoring, and informal sanctioning practices against less committed members. The second of these effects allows conservative groups to gain greater volunteer labor and financial donations, two key resources that promote congregational flourishing and achievement of organizational aims (Scheitle & Finke, 2008). The result is thought to be a more satisfying religious product or good, a coherent religious meaning system that is capable of providing compelling answers to religious questions and assurance concerning spiritual salvation. These more rewarding spiritual goods give members a reason to remain in the group; the relative absence of such rewards in liberal groups may

lead to spiritual uncertainty and eventual defection (Iannaccone, 1994; Kelley, 1972). Empirically, the strictness thesis has been accorded a major role in explanations of the dramatic rise of the Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular (Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). Although most discussions of the strictness thesis have been pitched at the denominational level, recent research using data on a large sample of congregations from diverse denominations provides considerable evidence of links between strictness, social strength, and church growth (Thomas & Olson, 2010).

One variant of the strictness idea emphasizes the importance of cultural tension with the dominant or surrounding societal order. What is required for this approach to succeed is an optimal level of tension, and given recent increases in education and income levels among many conservative Protestants, this is sometimes a challenging tightrope to negotiate. In one intriguing example, out of displeasure over the policies of the Disney organization regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees and issues, leaders of the SBC called for members to boycott all Disney products. This attempt to influence Disney—and by extension, other media organizations—was an abject failure and was quickly scuttled. Demands for members to abandon a broad array of desired consumer products aimed precisely at the kinds of middle-class families with children that make up a substantial share of the SBC created too much tension and required too much sacrifice to be viable. Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that the success of evangelicalism as a religious movement has been premised largely on the perception of being “embattled”; that is, evangelicals and their leaders have maintained sufficient tension with society to allow for the construction of a persuasive critique of (what is represented as) the dominant culture (Smith et al., 1998). Mainline Protestantism, by contrast, has experienced greater difficulty in promoting such a critical narrative, in part because it has been so influential in forging the social order of the early to mid-20th-century United States. The vast majority of leaders in business, media, education, and politics have been from mainline Protestant origins.

A second set of explanations has centered on the role of supply-side factors, or mechanisms that affect access or exposure to various types of religious options from which individuals may choose (Finke & Iannaccone, 1993). For example, the cultures of conservative Protestant and sectarian groups are innately more evangelistic in orientation than those of most mainline Protestant denominations. The most striking examples of zealous conversion efforts are found among sectarian religions, such as the Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses, for whom door-to-door contacts and mission activities are expected. Vigorous outreach is also an important part of most fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic faith communities. Although evangelism receives greater emphasis in conservative and sectarian religious groups, there is also evidence that even modest outreach and recruitment activities (e.g., members inviting friends to visit the congregation, pastors following up with prospective members) can be effective in spurring church growth, even when these efforts are conducted by mainline Protestant denominations (Callahan, 1983; Roozen & Hadaway, 1993).

Another type of supply-side explanation directs attention to the strategic planting of new congregations by conservative religious groups and the near absence of the same by most mainline denominations (Hadaway, 1990). Many of the new churches have been placed in suburbs and exurbs, for example, in areas with relatively homogeneous populations of middle-class families with children. This segment of the religious market may be lured by the promise of active congregations, dynamic youth programs, and family life ministries, and as engaged members of the community, they may be well positioned to recruit others like themselves. Mainline Protestant denominations, by contrast, often are invested heavily in downtown churches, with facilities that are large, expensive to maintain, and difficult to sell. Their members generally have left the urban core and relocated to the suburbs; their closest residential neighbors are now groups to which they may struggle to minister effectively, such as ethnic minorities, new immigrants, and young urban professionals. Taken together, these factors may increase the visibility and appeal of

conservative groups to residents of suburban and exurban areas while further diminishing the viability of mainline Protestant denominations.

Finke and Iannaccone (1993) have pointed out yet a third example of supply-side factors at work, this time at the macro level: the potential importance of changes in broadcasting laws and media technologies after the 1960s, such as the rise of cable television and the emergence of religious broadcasting networks. These changes had two effects: (a) They eliminated the monopoly on religious broadcasting that was once enjoyed for free by local, mostly mainline Protestant churches; and (b) they resulted in the ascendancy of paid religious broadcasting—on first a regional and later a national scale—mainly by conservative Protestant clergy and ministries. These developments brought fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic doctrines and worship styles to the attention of many viewers outside the traditional southern home base of conservative Protestantism.

Yet another set of explanations for conservative religious growth and liberal religious decline are demographic in nature. One such approach has been offered by Hout, Greeley, and Wilde (2001), who have linked the growth in numbers of conservative Protestant and sectarian adherents to the disproportionately high fertility rates of those groups during the immediate post-World War II period. Others have spotted a broader trend, noting that conservatives and sectarians—especially Mormons, but others as well—have had above-average fertility rates across several cohorts, whereas mainline Protestants have had relatively low fertility rates (Sherkat, 2010). It is also the case that most conservative groups are more successful than their mainline counterparts in retaining offspring raised within the faith (Sherkat, 2001). Over time, this has shifted the age composition of both conservative and mainline faith communities, in ways that suggest greater “demographic potential” for future growth among conservative Protestants, and especially sectarians, as compared with mainline Protestants (Park & Reimer, 2002). Another study has complemented these various findings, showing that there is an interaction or multiplicative effect of fertility rates and switching rates, such that the potential for the growth of a religious group is

especially dramatic when switching occurs at high levels among persons of childbearing age (Scheitle, Kane, & Van Hook, 2011).

Yet another type of demographic explanation—this one occurring at the macrolevel—has centered on the importance of migration patterns. Over the past several decades, large numbers of Americans have relocated from the Rustbelt areas of the Northeast and Midwest to the Sunbelt areas of the United States, primarily in search of economic opportunity or retirement. These regional migratory patterns also may have tipped the balance of religious competition and institutional strength further in favor of conservative Protestant groups (Stump, 1998).

Observers seeking to explain the shifting sands of Protestant church membership have also focused on changes within denominations and their seminaries, which may have eroded the appeal and competitive position of mainline Protestantism. Critics have asserted that mainline Protestant seminaries and denominational agencies have been captured by special interest groups focused on social and political issues, such as sexuality and global politics. As early as the 1980s, in mainline Protestant denominations, there was evidence of substantial divisions between clergy and seminarians, on the one hand, and laity, on the other hand, in terms of theological, social, and political matters; such cleavages were not found to the same degree within more conservative groups. Some observers have charged that evangelicals and secular political interests have fueled dissention and disarray within the ranks of mainline Protestant groups by funding theologically and politically conservative “special purpose” groups. These groups, in turn, have spurred opposition to liberal theological tendencies (e.g., ordination of female and gay or lesbian clergy) as well as mainline Protestant support for labor, peace, and antiwar efforts; civil rights, environmentalism; and other left-of-center social causes (Swecker, 2005; Tooley, 2008).

According to critics, mainline Protestant seminaries tended to neglect core training areas, such as preaching, mission activity, and church planning and management, which left new clergy unprepared to assume leadership of local churches. At the congregational level, according to many observers, conservative churches attended more closely to the

needs of middle-class families, sponsoring marriage seminars and youth ministries, helping them to deal with the intrusions of new work arrangements into home life, nurturing their spiritual lives through small group experiences and “mix and share” groups, providing dynamic worship services and engaged preaching, and encouraging other practices that fostered religious fulfillment. Consequently, church growth specialists have recommended that mainline congregations emulate some of these programs and innovations (e.g., Hadaway & Roozen, 1995). Indeed, studies of mainline Protestant congregations that have flourished despite the broader negative trends affecting their denominations showed that these successful churches were attempting to incorporate at least some of the lessons from their evangelical counterparts (e.g., Ellingson, 2007).

Catholic Growth

In addition to these dramatic changes within Protestantism, researchers have documented significant growth of Catholicism within the United States. According to estimates derived from the Glenmary data, the number of Catholic adherents rose more than 38% between 1970 and 2000. Steady Catholic growth also has been reported over the ensuing decade (Lindner, 2011). At least some of this increase may reflect more accurate counting of previously undercounted Catholic groups (e.g., Latinos) in more recent iterations of the Glenmary project. Furthermore, the ranks of Catholicism always have gained disproportionately from immigration (Sherkat, 2010), and in recent decades, many new Catholics have arrived from Latin America—particularly Mexico—as well as from parts of Asia and Africa (Massey & Higgins, 2011). Additionally, first-generation immigrants are typically younger than the population at large and have higher average fertility rates. One recent demographic forecasting the religious composition of the U.S. population through 2043 predicted that Catholicism would become the dominant faith in the United States, significantly outstripping its nearest competitors, conservative Protestantism and secularism (Skirbekk, Kaufmann, & Goujon, 2010). This projection, however, is heavily dependent on

(a) continued high levels of migration (legal and undocumented) from Mexico, (b) comparatively high levels of fertility among Latino Catholics, and (c) anticipated low levels of religious switching (e.g., to evangelicalism) within the Latino population.

These projections notwithstanding, several important issues and challenges confront U.S. Catholicism as it continues to grow. First, these estimates of numbers of adherents almost certainly include many nonpracticing Catholics. Individuals who were raised as Catholics may have stopped attending mass or participating in other ways for various reasons. For example, researchers have detected sharp declines in mass attendance among certain birth cohorts of Catholics during the 1960s and 1970s, probably reflecting opposition to official Church policies concerning contraception, abortion, and the status of women within the Church (Hout & Greeley, 1987). Some observers also have pointed to growing disagreement among Catholic laity about what it means to be a “good” Catholic (D’Antonio, 1994). There are also signs of broader cohort and generational divisions within U.S. Catholicism. Older Catholics tend to be more supportive of traditional teachings and express greater obedience to the Vatican, whereas baby boomer Catholics have placed greater emphasis on the role of individual conscience in deciding which church teachings and policies to follow; this valorization of personal conscience may have become even stronger among subsequent cohorts of Catholics in the United States (Pogorelc & Davidson, 2000; Williams & Davidson, 1996). Not surprising, there is considerable unease over the long-running clergy sexual abuse scandals and deep discontent over the handling of these issues by church leaders. These trends may signal a loss of confidence in the institutional church and its spiritual leadership among some Catholics.

In addition to these issues, U.S. Catholicism is affected by other significant demographic issues. First and foremost, the Catholic Church faces a well-documented priest shortage that has been developing for decades (Schoenherr & Young, 1993). Estimates from the Glenmary data suggest that there are as many as 10,000 Catholics per parish in some areas (e.g., southern California).

According to some commentators, the priest shortage can be solved only through major changes in Church doctrines and policies, such as allowing married priests and ordaining women (Schoenherr, 2004), which are unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future. Second, the Church is both blessed and challenged by changes in the composition of the Catholic population. In particular, the tremendous growth of Latino Catholics from various national-origin groups (e.g., Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans) has spurred calls for greater inclusiveness, sensitivity to Latino cultural nuances, and—perhaps especially—the need for Latino priests, who can provide Spanish-language mass while appreciating the backgrounds, experiences, and distinctive needs of Latino parishioners (see Chapter 33 in this volume; Diaz-Stevens, 1993; Fernandez, 2007; Matovina, 2011). Latino priests are in particularly short supply in the United States. Locally, much like mainline Protestant churches, many urban Catholic parishes in the Rustbelt are dealing with the consequences of members' migration (a) to suburbs and exurbs and (b) to the Sunbelt region, in pursuit of economic opportunity or retirement. These developments have led to the consolidation or closure of numerous parishes in cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, and others (Brand-Williams, 2010; Niedermier, 2009). Finally, declines in the Catholic education infrastructure may have implications for the spiritual formation of current and future generations of Catholics. Such declines may be amplified if large financial settlements to the victims of past clergy abuse degrade the Church's operating resources.

The Rise of Irreligion

Surveys such as the NORC GSS and the ARIS indicate that since the late 1990s, 15% to 20% of U.S. adults claim to have no religious preference (Hout & Fischer, 2002; Kosmin et al., 2001). These figures represent the high-water mark in detachment from institutional religion, at least during the modern period in the United States. Religious nonaffiliation had held steady at 5% to 7% throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and then had risen to 10% to 12% during the 1970s and 1980s (Glenn, 1987). Levels of irreligion are higher among certain segments of the population, such as younger and better educated

persons, and recent research on young adults suggests that these figures could continue to rise in the years to come (Smith & Snell, 2009).

What factors may account for the gradual rise in irreligion in the United States? One contributing factor may be the stronger ethos of religious voluntarism, or personal choice, that began with the baby boomer generation and has persisted (and even intensified) among subsequent cohorts (Roof, 2001; Roof & McKinney, 1987). This has led many individuals to be selective about the aspects of religious teaching or practice that one embraces, and by extension, it has made it more acceptable to eschew religion altogether. Furthermore, younger generations express less confidence in religious institutions and their leaders than previous cohorts (Hoffmann, 1998). Overall, declines in confidence in organized religion have been steeper than declines in confidence in other social institutions, such as business, the media, and the various branches of government (Chaves, 2011). Younger cohorts also may be disengaging primarily from more liberal religious groups, such as mainline Protestant denominations that have been less successful than others in socialization and spiritual formation (Sherkat, 2001; Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). Among baby boomers and subsequent generations, the growing ranks of the irreligious also may be swelled by disaffected Catholics, who are relatively unlikely to switch to other denominations, and by secular Jews.

The rejection of institutional religion also may be fueled by social and political developments (Hout & Fischer, 2002; see Chapter 40 in this volume). In particular, many individuals may be expressing antipathy and alienation toward the increased fusion of religion and politics, especially (but not exclusively) on the part of conservatives. This may reflect a rejection of their specific views regarding social issues such as abortion, gay rights, and a host of other topics, or it may imply a broader hostility toward (a) what is perceived as cynical manipulation of the sacred for secular ends and (b) what is seen as an inappropriate thrusting of narrow, group-specific religious views into the realm of public policy. In addition, the growth of the "no religion" category in surveys also may reflect rejection of religious elites for various types of malfeasance

(financial, sexual, etc.) and for their maladroit handling of the aftermath of institutional crises, such as the Catholic priest abuse scandals. This current trend may result from the pitched battles waged by some religious groups against what is perceived to be scientific authority and expertise (Hout & Fischer, 2002; Sherkat, 2008). Examples of this would include attempts by religious leaders to challenge the teaching of evolution in public schools; attempts to elevate creationism and its close cousin, intelligent design, to coequal scientific status; and opposition to stem cell research and various forms of contraception.

Individual Religious Affiliation, Denominational Switching, and Apostasy

Studies have shown that 40% to 50% of U.S. adults will alter their religious affiliations at least once during their lifetime, and many numbers will change their religious allegiance multiple times. These individual-level changes may involve switching (moving from one denomination to another) and apostasy (dropping out of organized religion altogether). It is widely suggested that such religious mobility has been heightened in recent decades, heavily influenced by the more voluntaristic religious ethos that prevails among baby boomers and members of subsequent generations. Some also have argued that these apparently elevated rates of religious mobility may have been facilitated by reductions in real or perceived denominational differences, as boundaries among specific groups have been supplanted by broader conservative versus liberal religious divisions (Wuthnow, 1988). Other findings suggest that such a conclusion may be premature (Sherkat, 2001). A number of factors may have lowered boundaries between specific denominations: (a) the rise of ecumenical initiatives among mainline Protestant and Catholic groups, as they joined forces in the 1950s and 1960s against the common enemies of communism, secularism, and materialism; (b) increases in social and geographic mobility; (c) increases in rates of interfaith marriage among persons from most denominations (except for the most conservative and sectarian ones; Sherkat, 2004); and (d) the growth of “special purpose” groups organized around social and political

concerns, within and between denominations, which increased within-group heterogeneity as well as contacts among like-minded persons from different denominations (Wuthnow, 1988).

Two types of data have been used to investigate patterns and correlates of religious switching and apostasy. One source of data is panel studies, in which samples of persons from specific birth cohorts have been tracked over time, and data on their religious affiliation have been collected at multiple time points (e.g., Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990). In some databases, such as the National Survey of Families and Households, which contains detailed information on the timing of major life transitions, it is possible to test fine-grained hypotheses about links between family changes (i.e., cohabitation, marriage, divorce, childbearing) and shifts in religious affiliation and practice. A second type of data involves cross-sectional surveys of U.S. adults, in which respondents are asked about (a) the religion in which they were raised (or their religion at age 16) and (b) their religion at the time of the interview. The latter data often are gathered via replicated cross-sectional survey projects, such as the NORC GSS. Because new samples are drawn every other year, it is possible to monitor switching patterns across “synthetic” birth cohorts, or groups of U.S. adults who were born within specific time intervals, permitting reliable inferences about large-scale trends in switching and apostasy. Thus, these two sources of data can offer complementary insights about changes in religious affiliation and apostasy.

What is known about the individual-level patterns and correlates of religious switching and apostasy? The earliest theoretical perspectives on these phenomena tended to emphasize the role of SES considerations, viewing changes in religious loyalties as either (a) expressions of status or (b) manifestations of status seeking. In other words, individuals who had experienced changes in their social status, in comparison with the social class in which they were raised, were thought to seek religious groups that were consistent with their newly attained status, in which they would encounter religious messages that resonated with their current experiences, and in which they would

interact with persons who shared their worldviews and lifestyles. According to this theoretical perspective, persons seeking upward mobility would gravitate to denominations that allowed them to gain information and make contacts that could facilitate social and economic gains. For persons from high-status religious groups (e.g., liberal Protestant denominations), further status ascent (and especially education attainment) could lead to apostasy. Although there is some empirical support for these hypothesized links between SES changes and religious mobility, they provide only partial explanations of the complexity of individual-level religious change in the United States (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1966).

Beyond these class-based explanations of individual religious change, how have sociologists and other social scientists broached this topic? One popular approach has involved the use of microeconomic reasoning—often termed *rational choice* theory—to understand individual-level variations in decisions about (a) which to join (if any) and (b) at what level to participate (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). The cornerstone of this perspective is the maximizing assumption, or the view that individuals make choices with the goal of deriving maximum benefit (e.g., spiritual reward, religious insight, social gains from religious involvement) for minimum cost. Definitions of benefits and costs, as well as other parameters of individual choices, are the focus of much debate and discussion. For example, individuals make decisions on the basis of the best information at hand, which is almost always imperfect and incomplete. Individuals may rule out some potential options at the outset and thus make choices from more constrained lists of possibilities, sometimes termed *feasible sets* (Ellison, 1995).

Although many rational choice analysts accept the notion of “revealed preferences” (i.e., the view that individuals’ preferences are demonstrated by the behavioral choices they actually make), others strongly disagree and argue that sociological insights can help to explain the gaps between (a) the religious groups or traditions that individuals themselves might prefer and (b) the religious groups with which they affiliate, if any (Sherkat,

1997; Sherkat & Wilson, 1995). The notion of “adaptive preferences” holds that individuals often come to prefer that with which they have become familiar; in other words, preferences adapt to life circumstances and socialization patterns. This simple idea helps to explain two empirical patterns: (a) An estimated 50% to 60% of U.S. adults will retain their religion of origin throughout much, if not all, of their lifetime; and (b) of those who do switch, many shift to groups that are “close to home” (i.e., similar to their religion of origin in some combination of doctrine, ritual, history, or social values; Sherkat, 2001).

The notion of “adaptive preferences” is in some respects analogous to the concept of “religious human capital,” as articulated by the economist Iannaccone (1990). Like other forms of human capital, religious human capital refers to knowledge, skills, and experiences that enhance productivity and efficiency. In the religious arena, individuals learn about doctrines and church teachings, gain experience in religious rituals and worship activities, and become steeped in subgroup cultures through formal religious education classes, informal interactions, and time spent engaged in religious pursuits with family members and others. Iannaccone (1990) has argued that subsequent religious decisions (e.g., about whether to switch, and what other groups to join) are shaped partly by the goal of conserving religious capital, and by avoiding the need to shelve entire stocks of religious training and to learn completely new religious traditions, doctrines, ritual styles, and so on. His work has found some support for this perspective in predicting religious switching behavior, patterns of interfaith marriage and subsequent decisions about religious change, and various other outcomes.

In addition to “adaptive preferences,” religious choices may be influenced by such factors as sympathy, antipathy, and example setting (Sherkat, 1997). Briefly, regardless of their own personal religious desires and needs, individuals may choose a religion out of deference to the wishes of others or the desire to emulate others (see Chapter 10 in this volume). Thus, it may be easier to remain in the faith tradition in which one was raised than to risk alienating parents, grandparents, or other family members.

Indeed, among the strongest predictors of such religious retention are having grown up in an intact, two-parent family characterized by a happy marriage and warm parent–child emotional bonds (see Chapter 7 in this volume; Sherkat & Wilson, 1995; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). This finding holds true even in samples drawn from members of the baby boomer cohort, as they passed through the tumultuous countercultural and political events of the 1960s and early 1970s (Sherkat, 1998). Conversely, studies of religious nonaffiliation and disaffiliation have found that persons raised by parents with no religious affiliation, and those who attended services rarely or never while growing up, are much more likely to report no religious affiliation in adulthood (Baker & Smith, 2009).

Switching denominations to accommodate the religious loyalties of one's spouse or spouse's family is yet another example of sympathetic religious choice (Waite & Lewin, 2010). Switching for marriage reasons typically occurs when the less religiously committed spouse (often the man) joins the religious faith or denomination of the more religious spouse (Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990). Religious choices also may be shaped by example-setting motives. This is especially relevant for parents with children, who—regardless of their own religious beliefs, if any—may choose religious communities with strong moral traditions, vigorous youth ministries and family activities, and other mechanisms for socializing young people (e.g., Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995). In the religious arena, women tend to be influenced by family-of-origin factors (i.e., the religious traditions in which they were raised), whereas men are more likely to be influenced by the families they help to form (i.e., the religious traditions of their spouses and the religious needs of their children; Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990). Religiously unaffiliated persons (sometimes termed *unchurched* in the research literature) are much more likely than others to have religiously unaffiliated spouses and to have no children in the home (Baker & Smith, 2009).

Although sympathetic religious choices have received more attention in the research literature, some religious choices can be made out of antipathy, or the desire to establish distance from family

members or one's faith tradition of origin. For some young people, the decision to join certain so-called cults in the 1960s and 1970s partly may have reflected such motives. Some persons may adopt nontraditional forms of spirituality (e.g., Satanism, and perhaps Pagan or Wiccan practices) with an eye toward shocking or scandalizing others, including authority figures (see Chapter 41 in this volume).

Other social factors may lead individuals to make religious choices that do not reflect their own preferences. The norms, conventions, and expectations of surrounding communities may dictate that persons belong to religious groups to sustain respectability or full community membership (Ellison, 1995; Ellison & Sherkat, 1995; Sherkat, 1997). This can lead some persons to maintain their ties to faith traditions that these persons otherwise might abandon. Examples of this phenomenon abound within many ethnic communities, where formally disavowing one's religion of origin also would involve cutting ties with family members, neighbors, and members of one's ethnic group. This can be seen within specific denominations that either (a) overlap significantly with ethnicity (e.g., Catholic; Jewish; to a lesser extent, denominations like Lutheran or Dutch Reformed) or (b) function in ways that are analogous to all-encompassing ethnic groups (e.g., Latter-day Saints or Mormons; Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990). These various groups are sometimes termed *quasi-ethnic* denominations in the research literature. Because it is more difficult for members to leave these groups than to depart other denominations (e.g., liberal Protestant groups) in which social ties are typically weaker in structure, disaffected members of quasi-ethnic groups are sometimes more likely (a) to abandon religion altogether, as opposed to switching their loyalties to a different denomination, or (b) to defect in place, becoming nominal or inactive members of their denomination of origin.

But the potential role of normative constraints and social expectations is broader than this. In fact, most religious communities are shaped and maintained through social network ties; individuals may be recruited into the group via preexisting social relationships, and congregations are geared toward the establishment of friendships and ongoing social

bonds (e.g., Ellison & George, 1994). These social connections offer social support and other rewards, and they also facilitate monitoring and subtle social sanctions when individuals reduce their religious involvement. Thus, events and processes in the lives of individuals that disrupt these relationships may influence religious group membership and practice. For example, studies have repeatedly shown that residential mobility—sometimes within the same community and certainly from one community to another—leads individuals to disaffiliate from their religious group, at least for a time (e.g., Sherkat, 1991). Although some persons join new churches or synagogues as part of the resettlement process, for others, religious involvement is never restored to its previous levels. At the aggregate level, those regions of the United States (e.g., the Mountain and Pacific states) with high levels of population mobility, and those communities in which large percentages of individuals have changed residential addresses within the previous 5 years, tend to have comparatively low levels of religious affiliation and attendance (Bainbridge, 1990).

Finally, the notion of normative constraints may help to explain temporal trends and variations in religious nonaffiliation, disaffiliation, and nonbelief. For example, U.S. adults born between the years 1945 and 1959 are much more prone to be religiously unaffiliated than others; many of these persons were raised with a denominational tie but subsequently abandoned organized religion in adolescence or young adulthood (Schwadel, 2011). These cohort-specific patterns are not replicated among persons born after 1960, perhaps because they were disproportionately raised with no religious affiliation themselves. Much has been written about the evolving religious and spiritual ethos of persons born during the 1945–1959 period, the so-called baby boomers (e.g., Roof, 1993, 2001). Members of this cohort may have left organized religion at comparatively high rates for several reasons, including (a) disaffection over the perceived inauthenticity of spirituality in established churches; (b) rejection of the social and political conservatism of many religious groups (e.g., their embrace or acquiescence vis-à-vis the Vietnam War and domestic social injustices); and (c) broader anti-institutional,

antiestablishment sentiments, and recognition of the key role of Judeo–Christian symbols, beliefs, and ethics in legitimating the system of capitalism and republican democracy. In addition, there is an observable tendency for persons, regardless of age, to report having no religion during the post-1990 period (Schwadel, 2010b). This latter pattern is mirrored by declines in self-reports of personal religious faith, measured in terms of “believing in God without doubt” as opposed to believing with varying degrees of doubt or not believing at all (Sherkat, 2008). Some observers have explained such modest but perceptible increases in agnosticism and atheism in terms of diminished normative constraints, which at earlier times might have made it socially costly to acknowledge religious nonbelief, or to abandon organized religious ties entirely (Sherkat, 2008).

Religious Attendance

Perhaps the most common indicator of individual-level religious practice in social science research has been (self-reported) attendance at religious services. There are at least three reasons for the strong focus on this indicator over the years. First, it has been presumed to be a more accurate and “objective” measure of religious involvement than items measuring aspects of private devotional practice (e.g., prayer, meditation, scripture reading), belief, experience, or religious motivation or orientation. As discussed in this section, however, this assumption has come under scrutiny in recent years. Second, although most large-scale nationwide surveys (e.g., the NORC GSS, the National Election Surveys) and most community surveys include at least a few items on religion, very few of these data-collection efforts are focused primarily on religion. Therefore, they tend to incorporate only a handful of generic religious items, one of which inquires about the frequency of attendance at religious services, aside from occasions such as weddings and funerals. Because this has been standard practice for roughly 50 years, we have a wealth of data on attendance patterns over time and from diverse communities across the United States. Furthermore, attendance items are regularly included on international surveys such as the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Project, thereby

facilitating comparisons in religious attendance patterns between the United States and other societies in Western Europe and elsewhere. Third, attendance is thought to be a substantively important indicator of religiousness because it indicates (a) the expenditure of a scarce resource, time, which implies religious commitment; and (b) exposure to religious socialization via exposure to formal moral messages (e.g., sermons), informal reinforcement via social networks, doctrinal training through religious education programs, and other social and institutional processes.

On the basis of self-reported attendance figures, many scholars have concluded that the United States is one of the most religious nations in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Indeed, only Ireland and Italy have higher average levels of self-reported religious attendance than the United States. Although this generalization is almost certainly accurate, over the past 15 to 20 years, a growing body of evidence has raised questions about the accuracy of self-report data on attendance, revealing that significant numbers of Americans exaggerate the frequency with which they attend worship services on surveys. One early study of apparent overreporting was based on data from two sources in a rural county: (a) an effort to monitor attendance on Sundays by visiting congregations and counting cars; and (b) a telephone poll of county residents, inquiring about whether they attended services during the week preceding the survey (Hadaway, Marler, & Chaves, 1993). These investigators concluded that overall rates of overreporting were 30% to 40%; however, because of the study design, it was not feasible to identify which persons or groups were especially prone to misreport their attendance.

Early explanations of this discrepancy attributed it to social desirability bias and interpreted it through the lens of secularization theory (Hadaway et al., 1993; Presser & Stinson, 1998). Critics raised a number of concerns, however. If attendance was being overreported out of social desirability motives, how well would this actually square with notions of secularization? Furthermore, many studies have cast doubt on the view that religious persons are particularly prone to give socially desirable responses to

survey items on religious matters or other sensitive topics (Regnerus & Uecker, 2007). And there are other plausible explanations for these exaggerated reports of the frequency of attendance, including various perceptual biases, such as telescoping (i.e., reporting events as taking place more recently than they actually do). Furthermore, while conceding that some overreporting may be occurring, other investigators suggest that the extent of this problem may be exaggerated (Smith, 1998).

More recent research on this topic has compared the responses to survey items on religious attendance with data from time-use diaries. There is some evidence that discrepancies in self-reports and diary data on attendance patterns are strongest among persons with high levels of personal religious identity salience (Brenner, 2011a, 2011b). This finding could be interpreted in several different ways. For example, it is possible that some respondents simply misunderstood the true intent of the survey item and assumed that the goal of the question was to gauge the general religiousness, rather than the actual attendance patterns, of individual survey participants. On the other hand, such findings raise the possibility that social-psychological processes involving identity salience and maintenance may underlie the overreporting of religious attendance in surveys (Brenner, 2011a).

Several studies have examined trends, patterns, and correlates of self-reported religious attendance, primarily using data from the pooled NORC GSS. At the individual level, it is widely recognized that certain segments of the U.S. adult population attend religious services more often than others (Roof & McKinney, 1987; Schwadel, 2010a). On average, women attend services more often than men, southerners attend more often than residents of other regions, and persons living in urban areas attend relatively infrequently, whereas their counterparts in rural settings attend more often than other persons. Average levels of religious attendance are substantially higher among African Americans, as compared with Whites (see Chapter 30 in this volume). Religious attendance levels tend to be higher among married persons than others, particularly their never-married counterparts, and persons with children in the home also are inclined to attend

more often than those who are not raising children. In survey data, analysts have observed that age bears a positive association with attendance; however, this relationship appears to be curvilinear, with the age–attendance association diminishing in late life (see Chapter 29 in this volume; Schwadel, 2011). Overall, contrary to many popular stereotypes, there is a modest but persistent positive association between education attainment and religious attendance among U.S. adults, whereas there is no clear association between income and attendance (Schwadel, 2010a).

Moreover, average attendance levels differ widely across religious denominations and faith traditions as well (Schwadel, 2010a). Specifically, members of sectarian groups (e.g., Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses) and conservative Protestant churches attend services at relatively high levels, followed by members of Black Protestant churches and Catholics. Members of mainline Protestant denominations, on the other hand, report much less frequent attendance at services. Some predictors of individual-level variations in attendance differ by denomination as well (McFarland, Wright, & Weakliem, 2011). For example, attainment of a college degree is positively associated with religious attendance for evangelicals, African American Protestants, and Catholics, suggesting that education may incline the faithful in certain groups into leadership positions or that it may facilitate greater knowledge and understanding of religious doctrines and teachings. By contrast, no such positive link between education and attendance is found among mainline Protestants.

In recent years, sociologists have turned their attention to clarifying temporal trends in religious attendance and other facets of religious practice and belief. Is the overall frequency of attendance at services declining in the United States? Is the percentage of persons who are regular attendees dropping? If yes, do such trends reflect the influence of period effects, such as cultural or political events, that affect the religiousness of wide swaths of the population in similar ways? Might they result from developments that have shaped the worldviews of particular birth cohorts in specific ways? And if there are apparent cohort effects, are they really the

result of cohort-specific events or conditions, or do they merely reflect cohort differences in population composition (e.g., more married persons with children in some cohorts as opposed to others)? Furthermore, given the age-related patterning of religious attendance noted thus far, and the fact that birth cohorts are aging as they move through time, how might the influences of age and cohort offset or interact with one another? Recent investigations have been aided by the development and refinement of new and more sophisticated statistical methods with which to explore these complex questions.

Researchers have used two strategies for coding individual responses to items on religious attendance. One of these is an ordinal approach, according to which responses are coded into the following categories: never, less than once a year, once or twice a year, several times a year, once per month, two to three times a month, nearly every week, once per week, and more than once per week. Another strategy has been to focus on those persons who attend services on a weekly basis and to contrast them with all other adults. These distinct approaches have yielded somewhat-divergent findings with respect to age, period, and cohort effects. Specifically, some studies have reported cohort-based declines in the probability of regular religious attendance, even when the potentially confounding effects of aging are taken into account (Schwadel, 2011). On the other hand, the frequency of religious attendance (measured as an ordinal variable) is relatively stable, with a modest period-based decline in the 1990s and little evidence of an overall cohort effect (Schwadel, 2010a).

Despite this apparent stability overall, however, there were substantial shifts across cohorts and periods for specific subgroups of the population (Schwadel, 2010a). For example, on average, in the early 1970s, women attended services approximately 10 days per year more often than men; roughly 30 years later, this gap was reduced to 6 days per year. There also has been some erosion of the regional gaps in religious attendance; although southerners still attend more often than other Americans, on average, this difference diminished noticeably between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s. Shifts in denominational attendance differences were

especially noteworthy: Although Catholics attended services an average of 18 days per year more often than mainline Protestants in the early 1970s, the corresponding figure was only 6 days by the early 2000s (Schwadel, 2010a).

These decomposition techniques also have been employed to illuminate changes within single denominations over time. For example, although family income is not a robust predictor of church attendance patterns in the general population, there is fresh evidence from analyses of pooled GSS data of emerging income gaps in attendance among Catholics (Schwadel, McCarthy, & Nelsen, 2009). In particular, low-income White Catholics from younger cohorts are especially prone to disengage from the institutional Church. It is unclear whether such religious distancing results from costs associated with church participation, shame or stigma associated with poverty within religious congregations, or other factors.

Personal Devotion and Religious Belief

Several studies have explored patterns and correlates of personal devotional activities, such as frequency and types of prayer activity. Researchers using data from single cross-sectional surveys of the U.S. adult population have identified a number of reliable correlates of the frequency of prayer (Baker, 2008b; Roof & McKinney, 1987). Women and older adults tend to pray more often than others. Some other demographic groups, such as southerners and parents, also pray more often, but these patterns can be accounted for by the fact that such persons tend to be more religious in general (i.e., they attend services more often, endorse conservative views about the interpretation of the Bible, etc.), and individuals who are more religious by these other indicators also tend to pray relatively often.

One of the most important sets of findings involving the social patterning of prayer frequency is that persons from socially marginal backgrounds, including racial minorities such as African Americans and persons from lower SES backgrounds (i.e., lower income and education), tend to pray more often than other Americans. This latter finding is broadly consistent with classical sociological theories of Marx and Weber. In a famous (or infamous)

dictum, Marx characterized religion as an “opiate of the masses,” by which was meant that religion was (a) an instrument via which capitalists could pacify workers and (b) a balm capable of dulling the pain caused by oppression. Another classical theorist, Weber, argued that there was an “elective affinity” between social class and religion, not only in the West, but also around the world, throughout history. According to Weber, privileged groups often have gravitated to forms of religion that legitimize and validate the material and status advantages they have accumulated, in their own eyes and those of the surrounding society. By contrast, deprived groups often have embraced religions that valorized and reinterpreted their disadvantaged plight, promising a reversal of fortunes in the world to come.

At least one analysis has attempted to decompose temporal trends in the likelihood of weekly prayer by age, period, and cohort (Schwadel, 2010a). This study has revealed (a) overall age-related increases in weekly prayer that are roughly linear over the life course, and (b) cohort-based declines in weekly prayer that are linear and accelerating for cohorts born during and after the 1940s. Evidence of period effects on weekly prayer, by contrast, is limited.

Individual prayer activity may involve many diverse styles, including, among other forms of prayer, (a) contemplative and meditative forms of prayer, through which individuals seek to draw nearer to a divine other; (b) colloquial prayer, in which individuals engage a divine other in ongoing patterns of communication much like conversation with close friends or other social intimates; (c) ritual prayer activities, in which individuals engage in recitations or other pre-set prayer routines; and (d) petitionary prayer, in which individuals tend to seek specific outcomes (e.g., better health, financial prosperity) or diffuse benefits (e.g., the well-being of others; Baker, 2008b; Poloma & Gallup, 1991). Research has revealed that among persons who pray, the most common foci of prayer are family members and friends, followed by efforts to build and nourish one’s relationship with God. Prayers for personal health and material rewards, by contrast, are among the least common types of prayer. Consistent with these arguments, recent studies confirm that the tendency to engage in such prayers—for financial

security or personal health—is heavily shaped by social location; for example, African Americans and persons from lower SES backgrounds (i.e., lower levels of income and education) are especially likely to pray for these specific outcomes (see also Chapter 19 in this volume). There are fewer sociodemographic variations in prayers that involve confessing sins or seeking a closer relationship with God (Baker, 2008b).

Next we turn to a small number of specific doctrinal beliefs that have received attention from sociologists. One of these is the belief in an afterlife, which is widely regarded as an important indicator because eternal life is a quintessentially religious phenomenon, a spiritual reward that cannot be obtained through participation in other facets of social life. In the theory of religion outlined by Stark and Bainbridge (1996), the afterlife is “a supernatural otherworldly compensator” (see also Chapter 5 in this volume). Consistent with the classical arguments of Marx, Weber, and others, studies have found that persons from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e., those with lower SES, racial and ethnic minority groups, aging persons) tend to express greater belief in an afterlife than others in U.S. society. In contrast to some findings from age-period-cohort analyses of other religious indicators, decomposition studies of trends in afterlife belief have demonstrated remarkable stability across periods and birth cohorts (Schwadel, 2011). Thus, although regular religious attendance and prayer, as well as adherence to certain doctrinal tenets, may be waning, belief in an afterlife remains consistently strong among U.S. adults, with no signs of decline on the short-term horizon (Greeley & Hout, 1999).

A second belief that has come in for analytic scrutiny is biblical literalism. Self-described “literalists” believe that the Bible should be interpreted as the literal Word of God and that everything has happened or will happen exactly as the Bible says. Although it may seem that literalism should be treated as a belief that is held by individuals, not everyone agrees with this view. Instead, some scholars have argued that “literalism” is instead a “marker” for a broader array of conservative theological orientations and social values. According to this perspective, there is not (nor can there be)

a single “literalist” reading of a complex text such as the Bible. Rather, any interpretation necessarily emphasizes some sections, passages, and elements of the text, while downplaying or ignoring others. Thus, “literalist” readings of scripture are fundamentally social products and are shaped within “interpretive communities,” or networks of conservative theologians and pastors who share this common definition of the meaning of the Bible. The meanings of “literalism” are subsequently distilled and disseminated to the faithful through writings, seminars, and sermons (Hempel & Bartkowski, 2008).

Studies have revealed strong associations between biblical literalism and a broad array of conservative social and political attitudes and policy preferences, ranging from family-related attitudes and practices (e.g., regarding gender roles, child discipline, sexuality) to government aid to the poor and support for U.S. foreign policy, among many others (Hempel & Bartkowski, 2008; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). Because biblical literalism is widely and publicly embraced by many conservative Protestant and sectarian churches, it is not surprising that members of these groups are particularly likely to believe that the Bible should be interpreted in this way. Catholics and members of mainline Protestant denominations are, on average, much less inclined to embrace this view (Sherkat, 2010). Individual-level studies have linked biblical literalism with race and ethnicity, as persons from non-White backgrounds are more prone to endorse this tenet; persons with children in the home are also more likely to be literalists (Stroope, 2011). On average, across denominations, more religiously active persons (e.g., regular attenders, particularly those whose spouses and friends belong to the same church) are more prone to endorse literalism (Stroope, 2011). Researchers exploring temporal trends in biblical literalism have found (a) modest positive effects of aging; (b) modest period declines in literalism; and (c) substantial cohort-based declines, which (like some other cohort effects on religious trends) are especially dramatic for cohorts born in the mid-1940s and after (Schwadel, 2011).

Furthermore, education bears an important association with literalism in at least three ways

(Stroope, 2011). First, at the individual level, education attainment is inversely associated with literalism. Second, over and above one's own education, the average education level of one's congregation tends to influence acceptance of biblical literalism, with persons in well-educated congregations being substantially less supportive of this belief. Third, congregational education levels moderate the association between personal education and literalist belief, such that well-educated individuals who belong to congregations with comparatively high mean education levels are especially prone to reject biblical literalism, regardless of denomination. This may reflect the role of education in shaping informal interactions and sermon content among church members. These findings also may be influenced by selection processes, as comparatively well-educated individuals may join congregations composed of similarly educated members, many of whom have access to a broader array of information (about the Bible and about other topics) and greater verbal ability (Sherkat, 2010), and therefore they may find it especially difficult to sustain a literalist worldview. Although the reasons for such complex patterns remain to be investigated, these findings underscore the potentially important role of institutional contexts in shaping matters of belief and doctrinal assent among individuals (Stroope, 2011).

Recent research has underscored the significance of Americans' beliefs about God for a host of outcomes, including childrearing practices; attitudes about morality, civil liberties, and economic policy; views on the nature of the United States as a Christian nation; and attitudes concerning foreign policy (Froese & Bader, 2010). One extensive program of research on this topic has identified four distinct sets of images or beliefs about God, on the basis of the extent to which God is regarded as more or less engaged in human and worldly affairs, and the extent to which God is perceived to be more or less judgmental (Froese & Bader, 2010). According to data from one nationwide probability sample, roughly one third of U.S. adults endorse an authoritative God image (both engaged and judgmental), while an additional one quarter of U.S. adults envision a benevolent deity (engaged but much less judgmental). Another one quarter of the U.S. adult

population regards God as critical (judgmental but not very engaged), while approximately one sixth perceive God to be distant (neither engaged nor judgmental, much like the "divine clockmaker" image of the early U.S. Deists). Endorsement of these God images varies substantially across religious and sociodemographic groups. For example, support for an authoritative God image appears strongest among African Americans, women, persons from lower SES backgrounds, residents of the South and Midwest, and members of evangelical and Black Protestant denominations. By contrast, Whites, men, well-educated persons and those with high incomes, and residents of the Northeast and West are more inclined to endorse a distant image of God, as are Jewish Americans. Benevolent God imagery is comparatively popular among Whites, women, person with a high school degree, and Catholics and mainline Protestants (Froese & Bader, 2010).

Researchers have investigated the social patterning of beliefs concerning religious evil, such as belief in Satan, hell, and demons. The available data indicate that these beliefs are relatively common, with more than 55% of U.S. adults in one poll stating that they "absolutely" believe in Satan and hell, and only slightly less than half reporting that they "absolutely" believe in demons (Baker, 2008a). Such beliefs are more common among African Americans as well as younger adults. Persons who are more religiously engaged (e.g., those who attend services more often) and who endorse the doctrine of biblical literalism are more inclined to believe in Satan, hell, and demons. Furthermore, most other sociodemographic correlates of these beliefs are eliminated when individual-level variations in religious practice, literalism, and affiliation are statistically controlled. Interestingly, belief in religious evil is stronger among persons from low-SES backgrounds, that is, those with lower levels of education and income (Baker, 2008a). This is consistent with arguments that difficult life circumstances, such as racial marginality or economic deprivation, may lead individuals to search for meaning and that religious persons may come to attribute their suffering to negative external spiritual forces. Furthermore, this association between SES and belief is moderated by

the frequency of religious attendance: For persons who attend religious services rarely or never, lower SES is linked with greater acceptance of religious evil, whereas among persons who attend services regularly, the effect of SES on such beliefs is neutralized. Thus, individuals who participate regularly in positive worship activities and enjoy the benefits of congregational networks and interactions may be less inclined to focus on such notions of religious evil and spiritual darkness (Baker, 2008a).

THE CHANGING U.S. RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

The U.S. religious scene is uncommonly dynamic and fluid, the ongoing product of the interplay of demographic factors, cultural shifts, and endogenous processes within religious organizations and communities. In this final section of the chapter, we identify several of the most important changes currently under way in this domain. Taken together, these changes have the potential to reshape our understanding of religion and spirituality in the American context for decades to come.

Religious Individualism and the Rise of Spirituality

One crucial development over the past 30 to 40 years has been the gradual decoupling of religiousness from spirituality for a significant segment of the population. Clearly, the declines in some forms of conventional religious practice and identification in recent years do not necessarily imply waning interest in the search for meaning or transcendence within the U.S. population. As noted at the outset of this chapter, consensus over the meaning of religion and spirituality remains elusive (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). It has become common, however, to associate the former with organized, institutionalized doctrines and practices, and the latter with personal, noninstitutionalized beliefs, practices, and experiences. It also has become common, in some areas of academic and popular discourse, to imply that the latter is more desirable, and perhaps more authentic, than the former (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Although it remains the case that most U.S. adults derive their spirituality from religious sources, and thus they

identify themselves as both religious and spiritual, a significant minority of U.S. adults (20% to 35%, depending on the data source and the wording of survey questions) now self-identify as “spiritual, but not religious.” There is some evidence (from GSS data and other sources) that this percentage has risen over the past 10 to 15 years. This identity is particularly popular among younger cohorts and well-educated persons and among those persons with liberal values on matters of civil liberties and morality (Shahabi et al., 2002; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

In addition to these emerging trends in self-identification, there are other clear signs of the decoupling of religiousness and spirituality. As historians of U.S. religion remind us, spiritual and philosophical alternatives to Christianity have long flourished (e.g., Fuller, 2001). A wide variety of non-Christian ideas and teachings has risen over the past 20 to 30 years (Roof, 2001). Examples of these alternatives include the widely varied strands of New Age thought and practice, Native American spirituality, Eastern-influenced ideas and practices—those derived from Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism—theosophy, astrology, and many others. Some of the most popular emerging alternatives to conventional forms of religious expression involve the integration of spirituality with domains as diverse as art, health, and leisure activities, in ways that are transformative of daily life (Bender, 2010).

These trends may reflect a hunger on the part of many Americans for direct, unmediated experiences of the transcendent. Many individuals who explore alternative modes of spirituality do so without entirely abandoning more traditional denominational identities and loyalties. Viewing such developments from the standpoint of the rational choice (microeconomic) theories discussed earlier, observers have argued that such forays into New Age, Eastern, and other alternatives amount to a “diversification of religious portfolios.” Briefly, if established religious groups and traditions cannot provide compelling answers on existential and spiritual matters, then adherents may act rationally by “hedging their bets” (reducing the risk of their spiritual investments) by investigating alternative practices and beliefs (Baker & Draper, 2010; Iannaccone, 1995). Some individuals go even further with spiritual

hyperindividualism, melding practices, symbols, and beliefs from a veritable smorgasbord of traditions into unique, highly personal spiritual regimes, a phenomenon sometimes termed *bricolage* (Roof, 2001). Other expressions of spiritual individualism are considerably more idiosyncratic and vacuous, such as Sheilism, the personal creed (“be good to yourself”) expressed by a young adult respondent in the modern classic volume, *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985).

Religion Among Adolescents and Young Adults

In recent years, several important programs of research have focused squarely on the religious practices and sensibilities of adolescents and young adults. To be sure, findings from this body of studies may partly reflect life-cycle influences because religious engagement often changes and declines during this period. Nevertheless, researchers have argued persuasively that information on religion among adolescents (ages 13–17) and emerging adults (ages 18–25) may offer vital clues about the future of religion in the United States (Pearce & Denton, 2011; Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). Some of the most impressive results have been based on large-scale longitudinal surveys such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (or “Add Health”) and the National Study of Youth and Religion, supplemented by numerous in-depth interviews with diverse respondents. The findings are complex and defy easy summary, but several patterns warrant specific mention. First, these studies point to apparent declines in religious participation, salience, and other conventional indicators of religiousness within these cohorts. Youth from conservative faith traditions—such as evangelical Protestants, Black Protestants, and members of sectarian groups such as the Mormons—were most resistant to these trends, whereas those from other religious backgrounds were among the most vulnerable. On average, those persons who did not attend college reported greater declines in religiousness than their college-educated counterparts (Uecker et al., 2007). Those who engaged in non-normative behaviors, ranging from early premarital sex or cohabitation to acts of delinquency, also tended to exhibit reduced

religiousness over time (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Uecker et al., 2007), whereas those who married at relatively young ages were especially unlikely to reduce their religious involvement (Uecker et al., 2007).

It also appears that family background factors may play an important role in shaping religious and spiritual orientations among young adults: According to several recent studies, those persons who experienced parental divorce before age 15, or whose parents were unhappily married, were more likely to abandon organized religion and conventional religious identities between the ages of 18 and 35 than others (Ellison, Walker, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2011; Uecker et al., 2007). A number of factors may contribute to this pattern. It is possible that some divorced parents disengage from congregational life—and thus may limit the religious socialization of children—because of real or perceived marginalization within congregations. Indeed, many observers have noted the cozy, and perhaps exclusivist, connection between religious institutions and “traditional” (nuclear) families, despite the fact that these families are increasingly in the numerical minority. This marginalization has led to calls for greater receptivity and outreach to divorced persons and to alternative family forms more generally. Selectivity may also play a role; divorce may be more likely among persons (and couples) who are less religious to begin with (Lau & Wolfinger, 2011). Another possible explanation, grounded in recent empirical analyses, centers on the lower levels of paternal involvement in religious socialization among children of divorce (Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007). Further research is clearly needed to clarify the possible role of family demography on changes in young adult religiousness.

Key observers have chronicled the emergence of distinctive religious identities, and an emerging religious ethos, among adolescents and young adults. In one recent analysis of the religious identities of 16- to 21-year-olds (Pearce & Denton, 2011), whereas only a small percentage (5%) of the respondents were declared atheists, roughly one quarter (24%) expressed some belief in a God but placed little emphasis on the role of religion in daily life. By contrast, only one youth in five (20%) reported a

high level of religious interest, belief, and participation. Another major study of the religious lives of U.S. teenagers has summed up the dominant ethos of this subpopulation with the term “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (Smith & Denton, 2005). According to these researchers, this creed involves a belief in a distant, relatively impersonal God who wants for people to be good, nice, and fair to others. This God intends for people to be happy and to have high self-esteem and remains largely uninvolved in human affairs unless called on to resolve specific personal problems. Good people go to heaven when they die. Except for the minority of youth who take conventional religious orthodoxy seriously, there is little evidence of religious exclusivism, or belief in the superiority of one’s own faith, among U.S. youth (Pearce & Denton, 2011). Indeed, one recurrent finding from studies of young people (and their parents) is the lack of familiarity with, and the strong disinterest in, religious orthodoxy or dogma. Even many young people who claim to be strongly religiously committed are strikingly unfamiliar with the teachings of their own faith as well as those of other major religions (Prothero, 2007).

Scholars interested in the religion of younger cohorts have highlighted other issues. For example, focusing on 20- and 30-something adults, one prominent observer has noted with alarm the widespread disinterest in, and perceived irrelevance of, religious institutions and doctrines (Wuthnow, 2007). According to his analysis, religious communities (and other key social institutions in contemporary society) are failing to provide much-needed guidance and support for these young adults as they make momentous decisions regarding marriage and family life, careers and finances, and other major domains. The conventional programming offered at the congregational level (e.g., adolescent Bible study groups, couples ministries), and the canned answers to questions about matters of faith that are offered by clergy and other religious leaders, simply are not attuned to the spiritual and emotional needs of many members of these cohorts.

Changing Forms of Religious Organization

Another important development over the past 10 to 15 years has been the emergence of new forms of

religious organization. One particularly significant phenomenon has been the rise of the so-called seeker church (Sargeant, 2000). Many (but certainly not all) seeker churches are also “megachurches,” or congregations with an average weekly attendance in excess of 2,000 (Thumma & Bird, 2009; Thumma & Travis, 2007). Megachurches are typically theologically conservative, although in practice, doctrinal issues often are deemphasized. They are most common in suburban areas near major cities and in the Sunbelt region of the United States. Although some megachurches are affiliated with evangelical denominations such as the SBC, many others are independent congregations.

Seeker churches unabashedly capitalize on the market-oriented zeitgeist of the contemporary U.S. religious scene (Sargeant, 2000). They typically attempt to appeal to a wide range of individuals and families by (a) conducting market research to gauge the needs and preferences of potential members and (b) offering targeted, specialized ministries and programs for particular groups, social and spiritual services designed to meet a broad array of personal needs, and small group experiences that stress spiritual intimacy, disclosure, and emotional support. Many of these groups also cultivate highly contemporary worship styles and dynamic preaching that addresses the hurts and hopes of middle-class families (or those that aspire to middle-class status). The seeker church approach allows maximum opportunity for members to choose from a menu of worship options, activities, and services according to their needs, and given their membership numbers in many parts of the United States, this approach clearly appeals to millions of Americans.

Although seeker churches and so-called megachurches have received a great deal of attention from scholars and in the popular media, one recent analysis has documented a crucial, but hitherto neglected, pattern: Although most churches are relatively small in membership, more and more religiously active Americans are attending larger and larger congregations (Chaves, 2006). For at least 2 decades, the average congregation size has been increasing in virtually every Christian denomination. The lone exceptions are sectarian groups, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons

(Latter-day Saints), which place strict limits on the membership size of local congregations. Increases in the number of members per Catholic parish may be driven by financial pressures and the well-documented priest shortage. In most Protestant bodies, this increase appears to be driven by economies of scale, as smaller congregations tend to find it more difficult to produce rewarding spiritual goods and worship experiences in the face of fixed and rising costs, which are led by clergy salaries and compensation. The trend toward increased congregational size may have a number of implications for the experiences of churchgoers. In particular, size tends to undermine social mechanisms that foster intimacy and accountability (Ellison, Krause, Shepherd, & Chaves, 2009). The anonymity of larger groups may make it more difficult to establish friendships, thereby placing greater stress on the role of small group experiences. This may make it more difficult to enforce norms regarding regular attendance, tithing, volunteering, and other activities that produce crucial congregational resources (Scheitle & Finke, 2008; Thomas & Olson, 2010).

Non-Christian Religions in the United States

Because a large majority of U.S. adults are either Christian or post-Christian, this chapter has focused primarily on dynamics involving Christian denominations, practices, and beliefs. Approximately 5% of U.S. adults (estimates are imprecise and vary across surveys), however, are believed to belong to non-Christian world faiths. Over the past decade, the social scientific research community has shown growing interest in the study of various non-Christian groups in the United States. In this brief section, we offer several summary observations about the increasing religious diversity of the American religious scene and its implications.

Although Jews have been present in United States since the 17th century, the largest streams of immigration occurred during the early to mid 19th century (primarily from Germany, Bohemia, and Moravia), the late 19th and early 20th centuries (from Eastern Europe), the mid 20th century (from

Germany and environs, in response to the Holocaust), and the post-World War II era (from what was then the Soviet Union; Hertzberg, 1989). Multiple data sources—the GSS, ARIS, and National Jewish Population Survey 2000–2001 (Kotler-Berkowitz et al., 2004)—suggest that the proportion of Jews in the U.S. population has declined significantly in recent decades, from 3% to 4% in the 1960s to an estimated 1.7% in the 21st century. The reasons for this decline are varied, and are likely to include (a) the more rapid growth of other (non-Jewish) groups; (b) declines in Jewish immigration from most regions of the world; (c) relatively high and increasing rates of interfaith marriage among most segments of the Jewish population; (d) relatively high levels of women's education, which is often accompanied by delayed marriage (or no marriage) and reduced fertility; (e) declines in Jewish schooling; and other factors (Kotler-Berkowitz et al., 2004). According to data from the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey, approximately 55% of American Jews are not affiliated with any branch of religious Judaism. In terms of self-identification, however, roughly 38% express a preference for Reform Judaism, the most liberal variant, and 27% indicate ties with Conservative Judaism. Although only 11% embrace Orthodox Judaism, their birth rates are far exceeding those among Conservative and Reform Jews (Klaff, 2006), and it is estimated that the numbers of Orthodox Jews may exceed those of other branches of Judaism within a few decades. The remaining 24% report no religious preference. Levels of religious belief and practice vary widely across the major Jewish denominational categories, with Orthodox Jews exhibiting much higher levels of synagogue attendance as well as most facets of personal piety, doctrinal belief, and home ritual observance than others (see Chapter 37 in this volume). For a significant segment of the U.S. Jewish population, Jewish identity is now constructed primarily in cultural (rather than religious) terms, gauged via commitment to Zionism and domestic Jewish causes and charities, widely shared Jewish values (e.g., tolerance, support for civil liberties and separation of church and state), and the observance of ethnic practices and celebrations (Kotler-Berkowitz et al., 2004).

Although some non-Judeo-Christian world faiths also have a long history in the United States, the visibility of these religions and the numbers of adherents increased sharply following the major revisions to U.S. immigration laws that began in the mid-1960s. These fundamental shifts in U.S. policy opened the door to large numbers of immigrants from non-European nations; although a large majority of entrants came from Latin America and Asia (more than 80% of all immigrants after 1980; see Chapter 33 in this volume), there were also large numbers from the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. Consequently, several million Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and adherents of other major world religions have made their homes in the United States (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Eck, 1997; see also Chapters 35, 36, and 38 in this volume). According to triangulated estimates from the NORC GSS, the ARIS, and several other large-scale nationwide surveys, roughly 0.7% of the U.S. adult population is Muslim, 0.5% is Hindu, and 0.5% is Buddhist (Smith, 2002). Rates of increase for each of these traditions between the 1970s and the 2000s are high, but they begin from quite small baseline membership figures. Although individuals certainly convert from Christianity (or from no religion) to non-Christian world faiths, the precise numbers of such converts are difficult to ascertain. And there are other significant world faiths besides those mentioned here, such as the Sikhs; however, reliable membership estimates for these groups are even more elusive.

At first glance, these estimates of non-Christians in the United States might seem much lower than expected. Why might this be the case? First, many observers may presume that migrants from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa are mainly non-Christians, implying that high levels of immigration may translate into an explosion of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and diverse other faiths. This is an exaggeration, however. According to analyses of data from the National Immigrant Survey, perhaps the most authoritative source of data on recent migrants to the United States, approximately one fifth of the respondents professed a non-Christian faith—a figure that is higher than the current U.S. population but lower than some scholarly and media accounts might imply (Massey & Higgins, 2011). Indeed,

surprisingly high percentages from Africa and the Middle East are Christian (Catholic or Orthodox, primarily). Many migrants from Asia are also Christian (Catholic or evangelical Protestant); others convert to Christianity after arriving in the United States (see Chapter 32 in this volume)

A large literature has examined the workings of the religious congregations formed or populated by recent immigrants (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007), including many non-Christian groups. To be sure, religion is often an important source of what Hirschman (2004) termed the three Rs—refuge, respectability, and resources—for immigrants (Connor, 2011). Researchers have demonstrated the significance of religious symbols, practices, and beliefs during the arduous migration process itself (Hagan, 2008). Nevertheless, the empirical links between immigration and religion in the United States are complicated (Alanezi & Sherkat, 2008). Recent research using data from the New Immigrant Survey has indicated that the experience of migration is dislocating, rather than theologizing, for many new immigrants. Overall, immigrants tend to be less religiously active than they were in their countries of origin, and those who join religious communities are typical neither of the broader immigrant population nor of their own faith traditions (Massey & Higgins, 2011).

Observers have suggested several other reasons why perceptions of non-Christians in the United States may be somewhat inflated. These faith traditions have become much more visible in recent years, through popular culture, celebrity conversions, and other developments (Smith, 2002). Many persons who are religious dabblers, tinkerers, and bricoleurs may appropriate elements of non-Christian practice (e.g., Hindu worship techniques, Buddhist home altars) as part of their highly individualized spiritual pursuits, without becoming faithful adherents of the broader tradition (Roof, 2001). Moreover, as we noted, until recently many (perhaps most) non-Christian immigrants remained in major cities, especially the key destination points for immigrants, or in specific areas such as university communities. Consequently, few Islamic mosques, Buddhist and Hindu temples, and other non-Christian religious centers were seen outside

these areas. In recent years practice, of non-Christian faiths has become more geographically dispersed, and especially amid the cultural tensions of the post—September 11 environment, this new visibility has sometimes been met with public animosity, especially from proponents of the doctrine of American exceptionalism, who typically believe that the United States is (or should be) a Christian nation (Wuthnow, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Returning to themes raised at the outset of this chapter, our guiding objectives have been threefold: (a) to review evidence regarding religious affiliation and nonaffiliation in the contemporary United States, (b) to explore patterns and correlates of religious practices and beliefs, and (c) to identify and discuss—very selectively—several trends that are reshaping the U.S. religious configuration. To be sure, this has meant that complex issues have been depicted with a broad brush, whereas many worthy issues and important developments have gone unremarked. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this chapter has provided a useful overview of key landmarks and topographical features of the contemporary U.S. scene.

We began this chapter by observing that notions of secularization are central to the works of classical sociological theorists, including Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others. Consequently, secularization is embedded in the DNA of sociology and other social science disciplines. The assumption that the forces of modernity would chase religion from the public sphere, undermine the persuasiveness of religious ideas and narratives, and eventually erode individual religious practices and beliefs was rarely challenged during much of the 20th century. Despite the appeal of secularization theory among many European sociologists, however, circumstances in the United States had led scholars to question the relevance of these ideas to the U.S. context by the late 20th century. In their eyes, the U.S. religious system functioned much like a market, with minimal regulation, low barriers to entry, and vigorous competition for adherents among a plethora of religious firms and entrepreneurs offering diverse

religious goods. In the 21st century, although there are clear signs of secularity within some segments of the U.S. population, the United States remains one of the most religious nations in the industrial West. Barring unforeseen developments, this is likely to remain the case for some time.

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