Revisiting the Social Sources of American Christianity 1972–1998

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We examine the relationship between demographics and adherence to certain religious traditions within American Christianity. Starting with Niebuhr's Social Sources of Denominationalism, *we interact with a long scholarly tradition that connects demographics and religious groups, particularly the abiding "class-sect" relationship. Included in this literature are works by Roof and McKinney (1987), and the particular profiles of evangelicals by Hunter (1983) and more recently by Smith et al. (1998). Findings indicate slow convergence on certain demographics highlighted by Niebuhr (social class, region, population size), and slow divergence on other demographics (age, percent female, percent married, number of children). Contrary to previous research, evangelical Protestantism is not very distinct demographically; however, black Protestantism is, and this reflects the continued demographic significance of race. Our findings lead us to question accepted theoretical links between demographics and religious groups. We end with some preliminary recommendations for future theorizing in this area.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the classic works of Weber (1922 [1991]) and Troeltsch (1911 [1931]), sociologists have attended to the link between demographics and religious groups to demonstrate the importance of the social sources of religious divisions. Niebuhr (1929), for instance, demonstrated that certain sect-like denominations (the "religions of the disinherited") drew constituents from lower classes and immigrant groups while church-like denominations drew from the upper classes. Additionally, he argued that the segregation of African Americans into separate and "dispossessed" denominations created a color line within American Christianity. Since Niebuhr, research has emphasized both the stability of the demographic characteristics of certain religious groups as well as their changing contours (Lenski 1961; Greeley 1972; Roof and McKinney 1987; Kosmin and Lachman 1993).

Given this history and the recent changes affecting American religions, we examine the demographic distinctions among four major American Christian traditions in the last decades of the 20th century. Using data from the General Social Surveys from 1972–1998 we present: (1) the trajectory of these social sources to consider whether demographic distinctions continue to operate in the present social context; and (2) the influence of age/period effects or cohort replacement in understanding the sources of these changes. We include not only the relevant demographic characteristics of class and region emphasized by Niebuhr, but also characteristics used in other research to demonstrate demographic distinctions, such as age, sex, marriage, and birth rates. In general, we find that among the Christian religious traditions, slow convergence is occurring on those demographics that have been historically viewed as distinguishing religious groups. Other demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marriage, and birth rates are slowly diverging among the major Christian traditions. We conclude our analysis with a consideration of the theoretical ramifications of these findings.

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THE DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY: A REVIEW

Since Niebuhr's time American Christianity has undergone seismic shifts in response to the changes in American culture. Originally, the social sources of religion were thought to be heavily class-based. In *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Niebuhr called sectarian denominations the "churches of the disinherited" since they met the needs of the poor (1929:26–76). Weber argued that the dispossessed seek "release from suffering" while the rich seek "psychological reassurance of legitimacy" ([1922] 1991:107–08). These sociologists connected low social privilege with sectarian religious status and high social privilege with "churchly" religious status, and their corresponding doctrines legitimated their social position. In addition to class, religious divisions followed regional and racial/ethnic lines (Niebuhr 1929).

Niebuhr, however, went beyond Weber by theorizing a sect-to-church transformation, where a religious sect acquires "churchly" characteristics as its constituents gain social status. Demographic change is normative, although new sects are created in the process that continue to attract the disinherited. Thus, the disinherited-sect link remains stable in spite of the status gains of groups. However, recent research has suggested that some sectarian groups show changing demographics while maintaining sectarian characteristics. For example, several researchers note significant status gains of evangelicals and Mormons (Hunter 1987; Roof and McKinney 1987; Roof 1993; Wuthnow 1988).

More recently, Roof and McKinney (1987) have reexamined the demographic characteristics of American religious groups, suggesting that the demographic distinctions between denominations are weakening (1987:145). Increased social status of many groups, changing socio-religious boundaries, and greater voluntarism have broken down the earlier denominational divisions of Niebuhr's time. Thus, denominationalism has changed in significance where "within-family difference between denominations have blurred while between-family differences are visible" (Roof and McKinney 1987:145). The earlier social sources of denominationalism now distinguish large religious traditions where denominations were grouped by a liberal-conservative ideology and along the enduring racial divide (Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988).

Besides an emphasis on religious traditions, Roof and McKinney's research and the work of others have introduced additional demographic variables. This research indicates change within overall stability, such that religious traditions change with the broader society, but maintain their demographic profile relative to other religious traditions. Evangelical Protestantism,[1] for instance, is seen as a sectarian religious tradition with a constituency that has lower educational attainment, less wealth, greater rural and southern residence. Additionally, evangelical adherents are more likely to be old, female, married, and have higher birth rates (Hunter 1983; Roof and McKinney 1987). Smith et al. (1998), however, have recently challenged this view. Using a strategy of self-identification with specific religious traditions, these scholars argue that evangelical Protestants are not disproportionately poor, uneducated, rural, female, or old. Are these markedly different profiles a result of differing sampling strategy, change over time, or both? Our data allow us to answer this question.

In contrast, mainline Protestantism with its more privileged denominational constituency came to be seen as a "churchly" religious tradition. This religious tradition's constituency is slightly younger, has a more equal gender distribution, is less often married, and has lower birth rates (Roof and McKinney 1987; Smith et al. 1998 (with the exception of gender)). A third strand within American Christianity, black Protestantism, is composed primarily of African-American denominations. This religious tradition is also marked by signs of disinherited social status that parallels the continued social segregation of African Americans more generally (Wilson 1980; Massey and Denton 1993). Research shows that this religious tradition has the lowest educational attainment and wealth accruement and is the most urbanized and southern in residence (Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Hunt and Hunt 1999). In addition, black Protestantism is disproportionately

young, female, unmarried, and has the highest birth rates (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Roof and McKinney 1987).

Lastly, Roman Catholicism has transformed itself from a religious tradition found among the dispossessed immigrants of the early 20th century to a religion of the middle class. Its demographic profile is fairly similar to that of mainline Protestantism. Catholics have higher levels of education and wealth, are less likely to reside in rural and southern locales, are younger, are not disproportionately female, and have lower marriage and birth rates (Davidson et al. 1997; Greeley 1991; Hunter 1983; Roof and McKinney 1987).

METHODS AND DATA

With these profiles in mind, we consider the following demographic characteristics across the major Christian religious traditions: (1) two measures of social privilege, education (measured in years) and income (12 categories ranging from 1 = less than \$2,000 to 12 = more than \$25,000); (2) two measures of geographic locale, southern location (coded by state of residence)[2] and residential population size (measured in six categories where 1 = less than 3,000 and 6 = more than 500,000); (3) measures of age (in years) and gender distribution (percent female); and (4) two measures of family structure, marriage (percent married) and birth rates (number of children). The first four variables are important in Niebuhr's analysis, while the last four variables are present in analyses by Roof and McKinney (1987), Hunter (1983), and Smith et al. (1998).

We employ three statistical strategies to analyze these data. First, we computed yearly percentages or means for each tradition and each demographic. For continuous demographic variables (age, number of children, income, education, population size), we tested for significant differences between means using the Scheffe multiple comparison procedure, a conservative pairwise comparison of means.[3] For discrete demographic variables (sex, marital status, southern residence), we compared percentages using a chi-square test. Second, we summarize the cumulative data by presenting the overall average (for all the years) and the direction/magnitude of change (regression slope) for each demographic for all four religious traditions. Third, we look at the relative contribution of intracohort (individual demographic change within a cohort, due to age or period effects) and intercohort (change due to cohort replacement) effects to total change. In this analysis, intracohort effects do not distinguish between age and period effects. Intercohort change stems from the replacement of older cohorts by younger ones (Firebaugh 1997:23). It accounts for the effect of change in the relative size of the cohorts over time, where the younger cohorts—who (may) differ from the older cohorts on the demographic in question—occupy an increasing percentage of the total sample as older cohorts decrease. Age-period-cohort analysis seemed warranted based on the emphasis placed on generational change by Niebuhr (1929) and Hunter (1987), because it clarifies the sources of change and because it suggests the demographic profiles of incoming generations.

We use Firebaugh's method for estimating intracohort and intercohort effects in repeated surveys using regression techniques (Firebaugh 1989, 1992, 1997). In this technique, regression coefficients estimate the annual change in a dependent variable using the following equation:

$$Y_{it} = b_0 + b_1 \, year_{it} + b_2 \, cohort_{it} + e$$

where y_{it} is the value for y for the ith respondent and the tth survey, b_1 is the estimated intracohort (within-cohort effects) slope, b_2 is the estimated intercohort (cohort replacement) slope, and where year is the survey year and cohort is an individual's birth year (Firebaugh 1997:24). For continuous demographic variables we used OLS regression. We dichotomized discrete demographic variables and used logistic regression following the same procedure.[4] Using regression coefficients, we are able to estimate the contribution of intracohort change by multiplying the intracohort slope (b_1)

by the difference between the year of the final (yr_t) and the first survey (yr_1), such that:

$$\text{Intracohort change} = b_1(yr_t - yr_1).$$

Similarly, to estimate the effect of intercohort change on overall change, we use the birth year regression coefficient (b_2) multiplied by the mean birth year in the final survey year (c_t) subtracted from its corresponding mean in the first survey year (c_1):

$$\text{Intercohort change} = b_2(c_t - c_1) \text{ (Firebaugh 1997:24)}.$$

In our analysis, the final and first survey years were 1998 and 1972 (26 years), save for the income variable, which was first used in the 1973 survey. For more information on the details of Firebaugh's method, see Firebaugh (1997).

Our data come from the 1972–1998 General Social Survey cumulative file with a full sample of 38,116 adult Americans (Davis and Smith 1996),[5] and our classification of Christian religious traditions (defined by denominational affiliation) follows the schema developed by Steensland et al. (2000). While there are limitations to a denominational approach,[6] it is the only strategy that is available over time in the GSS. The denominational measure used here is a new and, by some counts, improved measure of religious traditions based on the denominational information in the GSS (Steensland et al. 2000).

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Trend Analysis

We conducted graphical and statistical analyses on each of the eight demographic variables across all four religious traditions to assess the yearly change and overall trends (not shown). In Table 1, we present the overall mean (average over the full 26-year span of the GSS) of each demographic in each tradition, and the slope coefficient[7] of that demographic when it is regressed on "year of study" only. This represents the best estimate of the average change per year for that demographic in a given religious tradition. We present OLS regression slopes for continuous demographic variables (age, number of children, income, education, population size) and logistic regression slopes for dichotomous variables (female, married, south).[8] Since our analysis includes comparisons across four Christian groups (as well as with the national averages) over a 26-year period on eight demographic variables, it is necessary to present only selective findings and discuss them in broad terms (other tabulated results available from the authors).

Looking first at educational attainment, all religious traditions show increases over time, as the positive slope coefficients indicate. Over the years, there is a consistent ranking in educational attainment; mainline Protestantism maintains its status as the most educated religious tradition (overall average of 12.89 years of education) followed by Catholicism (12.49), evangelical Protestantism (11.79), and black Protestantism (10.96). However, those traditions with the lowest average education have "steeper" slopes, indicating their educational gains are greater. Additionally, the gap between the groups has narrowed somewhat over time, although differences between traditions are still statistically significant in the late 1990s. Potential convergence in educational attainment appears to be occurring.

The general pattern observed in educational attainment comparisons holds true for total family income levels as well. As expected, all religious traditions exhibit increases over time, with black Protestantism lagging behind the predominantly white Christian religious traditions. However, black Protestantism also shows the greatest gains in income over time. Evangelicalism has a lower average income than the other predominantly white Christian traditions in most years, while black Protestantism consistently lags behind them all.[9] Evangelical Protestantism is closest to the national average income, while there are almost no significant differences between mainline

TABLE 1
MEANS AND SLOPES OF DEMOGRAPHICS BY RELIGIOUS TRADITION, GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS 1972–1998

	Education Years Attained	Total Family Income[a]	Region % South	Residential Population Size[b]	Age in Years	Gender % Female	Marriage Rates % Married	Number of Children
Total Population (N = 38,116)								
Mean	12.44	9.09	0.34	3.26	45.25	0.56	0.58	1.99
Slope	0.075	0.203	0.007	0.003	0.046	0.005	−0.037	−0.016
Evangelical Protestants (N = 8,932)								
Mean	11.79	9.07	0.54	2.87	45.96	0.58	0.63	2.16
Slope	0.085	0.205	−0.016	0.009	0.085	ns	−0.036	−0.019
Mainline Protestants (N = 8,932)								
Mean	12.89	9.19	0.30	2.89	49.25	0.58	0.62	1.97
Slope	0.073	0.213	0.021	0.006	0.136	0.011	−0.041	−0.016
African-American Protestants (N = 3,208)								
Mean	10.96	7.32	0.57	4.10	44.55	0.63	0.40	2.47
Slope	0.107	0.247	ns	−0.009	−0.013	0.019	−0.043	ns
Roman Catholics (N = 9,502)								
Mean	12.49	9.36	0.18	3.45	43.56	0.56	0.58	1.99
Slope	0.078	0.202	0.020	−0.004	0.079	ns	−0.036	−0.016

Note: All regression slopes are significant at the 0.05 level, except those marked "ns" (not significant).

[a]Income categories range from 1 (<$1,000) to 12 ($25,000 or more).

[b]Population size ranges from 1 (rural areas/town from 0–2,999) to 6 (cities of 500,000 or more).

Protestantism and Catholicism in the year-by-year analysis. In general, however, those traditions with the highest mean incomes have "flatter" slopes, indicating an overall convergence.

Looking next at southern residence, we see that evangelical Protestantism and black Protestantism are more likely to be found in the south than are mainline Protestantism and Catholicism. However, evangelicalism is becoming less distinctly southern over time while Catholicism and mainline Protestantism are becoming more southern. black Protestantism remains stable during this time period. Thus, the religious distinctiveness of the south seems to be lessening.

Like the previous three demographics, we see slow convergence within overall stability for residential population size. Evangelical and mainline Protestantism are predominantly in less populated areas, whereas black Protestantism tends to be found in highly populated areas. Surprisingly, there are no significant residential population size differences between evangelical and mainline Protestantism. While the slope coefficients are weak, the direction of the slopes for evangelical and mainline Protestantism are positive and significant, indicating that they are becoming more urban, whereas black Protestantism and Catholicism are becoming slightly more rural. In sum, indicators of Niebuhr's "social sources of denominationalism" are slowly moving toward convergence. At the present rate, of course, social distinctiveness will continue for many years, particularly for black Protestantism in the areas of income, education, and population size, and the disproportionate presence of black Protestantism and evangelical Protestantism in the south.

Moving to the last four demographic variables, we find that the population is slowly aging. Mainline Protestantism appears consistently older than other traditions, and is the most rapidly "aging" of all traditions as seen in the large slope coefficient. Catholicism, African-American, and evangelical Protestantism tend to have younger members, although black Protestantism is not "aging" overall (as indicated by the negative slope). Interestingly, there are no significant differences in mean age between evangelical, African-American, and Catholic Christian traditions for any given year. Our year-by-year analysis supports the conclusion that only mainline Protestantism is distinguished as having a disproportionately older constituency.

Regarding gender, black Protestantism is disproportionately female and is becoming more so over time. We note for example, that between 1972–1974, the average percentage of females in this tradition was 56.7 percent while between 1994–1998 the percentage of females rose to 65.9.[10] In contrast, evangelicalism and Catholicism show no significant increase in percent female over the same period while mainline Protestantism shows a slight increase. Generally speaking, black Protestantism is distinct in its gender composition.

There is a significant decrease in marriage rates over time for all traditions, as indicated by the negative slopes. Between 1972–1974, the average percent married for all four religious groups is 70.9, as compared to 47.5 percent between 1994–1998. We find that evangelical Protestants are significantly more likely to be married than Catholics and African-American Protestants and they are usually more likely to be married than mainline Protestants. The most significant decline, however, appears in the African-American Protestant tradition. These findings are in line with societal-wide trends toward delayed marriage and permanent singleness.

Finally, with regard to birth rates, there is a significant decline over time in each of the predominantly white religious traditions. black Protestantism has the highest birth rates followed by evangelical Protestantism, Catholicism, and mainline Protestantism, respectively. However, only black Protestantism differs significantly from the other traditions in any given year. Again, we find black Protestantism to be demographically distinct in both percent married and number of children per woman.

To summarize: mainline Protestantism has an older constituency; black Protestantism is disproportionately female, with lower marriage rates and higher birth rates. Evangelicalism is closest to the national average in age. Catholicism is closest to the national average in percent female, married, and number of children. Most important for our analysis, there is little evidence of convergence on these four demographic variables, even among the predominately white Christian traditions.

Decomposing Intracohort and Intercohort Change

We now turn to our examination of cohort differences among American Christian religious traditions. In Table 2, we assess the sources of change over time by decomposing the total change into within-cohort and cohort replacement effects for seven of the eight demographic variables (age excluded).[11]

The "total" for each religious tradition in Table 2 represents the total change over time, which is estimated by multiplying the regression slope coefficient for "year" (the best estimate for the yearly change in the dependent variable) by the number of years between 1972 and 1998 (26 years).[12] For instance, evangelical Protestants show an average increase of over two years (2.22) of education between 1972–1998. The intracohort and intercohort figures represent the amount of the total change that can be attributed to within-cohort change and cohort replacement effects, respectively, as estimated by Firebaugh's method. For example, roughly two-thirds (1.39) of the education increase can be attributed to the higher education levels of younger evangelical cohorts, while the remaining one-third (0.85) increase is related to gaining education over the life course. For the "south," "female," and "married" variables, logistic regression coefficients were used; OLS regression estimates were used otherwise.

Income and education are the only demographics that show both a positive intracohort and intercohort slope, meaning that individuals are gaining income and education over time and that cohort replacement accounts for some of the overall increase. For education, most of the change is due to the higher educated younger cohorts, particularly for black Protestantism, where nearly 90 percent of the change is due to cohort replacement. Black Protestantism also exhibits the greatest increase in education over time (but is still below the other predominantly white Christian traditions). On the other extreme, only about half (54 percent) of the change can be attributed to cohort replacement effects for mainline Protestantism. For income, between 79–87 percent of the total change can be attributed to individual increase over time among all four religious traditions. Evangelical and black Protestantism, which have comparatively lower levels of income, have the highest overall and intercohort increases, suggesting that these traditions are likely to continue to catch up with Catholicism and mainline Protestantism in this demographic characteristic. Overall, decomposition suggests converging levels of income and education for the four traditions.

Regarding southern residence, we see that evangelicalism's declining presence in the south and mainline Protestantism's increasing presence is almost completely due to within-cohort change, or migration. Evangelicals tend to shift their residential base outside the south as they age, while mainline Protestants tend to shift toward the south. Change over time for Catholics is mainly due to intracohort migration as well, but a significant portion of the change is due to intercohort effects, where younger Catholics reside more often in the south. This may be due to the immigration of (nonwhite) Catholics into the southern states.

Black Protestantism and Catholicism, which tend to be urban, are becoming more rural as the negative total change indicates. The overall movement away from urban locales is weakened by the tendency of younger cohorts to reside in heavily populated areas. For evangelical and mainline Protestantism, which are disproportionately rural, we find parallel intracohort and intercohort effects. In both these traditions, more of the change in residential population size is accounted for by individual intracohort effects, such as migration at later stages in life. At this point, of course, we do not know if younger cohorts within Catholicism and black Protestantism will continue to move out of urban centers as did the older cohorts. If they do, convergence will continue on this demographic as well.

Looking at gender distribution, black Protestantism has the greatest total change over time and this is the only tradition where younger cohorts are at least as likely to be female as the older cohorts (as indicated by the positive, albeit insignificant, intercohort effect). While evangelicalism and Catholicism are not becoming significantly more "female" over time, mainline Protestantism and black Protestantism are, likely due to higher rates of male mortality.

TABLE 2
TOTAL CHANGE DECOMPOSED BY INTRACOHORT AND INTERCOHORT, CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHANGE,
GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS 1972–1998*

		Education	Income[a]	South	Population Size	Female	Married	Number of Children
Evangelical Protestants	Total[b]	2.22	3.78	−0.41	0.24	0.13 ns	−0.95	−0.50
	Intracohort[c]	0.85	2.98	−0.41	0.16	0.32	−1.14	0.44
	Intercohort[d]	1.39	0.75	0.01 ns	0.08	−0.19	0.20	−0.96
Mainline Protestants	Total	1.90	3.18	0.54	0.14	0.28	−1.07	−0.40
	Intracohort	0.87	2.60	0.56	0.09 ns	0.38	−1.23	0.22
	Intercohort	1.03	0.55	−0.02 ns	0.05	−0.10	0.19	−0.63
African-American Protestants	Total	2.78	4.13	0.05 ns	−0.24	0.48	−1.12	−0.15 ns
	Intracohort	0.35	3.40	0.12 ns	−0.36	0.40	−0.94	0.80
	Intercohort	2.59	0.74	−0.07 ns	0.13	0.08 ns	−0.19	−1.03
Catholics	Total	2.04	3.10	0.52	−0.10	0.06 ns	−0.94	−0.42
	Intercohort	0.76	2.70	0.34	−0.19	0.12 ns	−0.81	0.58
	Intercohort	1.27	0.39	0.18	0.09	−0.06	−0.15	−0.99

*All regression slopes are significant at 0.05 level or higher except those marked "ns" (not significant).

[a]Income item began in 1973.

[b]Estimates total change between 1972 and 1998 are based on the OLS or logistic "b" (slope) coefficients multiplied by number of years (b * 26). Intracohort and intercohort estimates do not always sum to the total exactly because of rounding.

[c]Amount of total difference contributed by intracohort change (age/period effects).

[d]Amount of total difference contributed by intercohort change (cohort replacement effects).

Decomposing marital status shows that the sharp decline in percent married is largely due to within-cohort change, most likely because of divorce or the death of a spouse. Interestingly, the significant negative intercohort effects for black Protestantism and Catholicism indicate that younger cohorts are less likely to be married than the older cohorts. In contrast, younger evangelical and mainline Protestant cohorts are more likely to be married than older ones.[13] Again, this analysis suggests that at least black Protestantism will continue to diverge from its predominantly white counterparts.

Regarding fertility, the significant generational decline in birth rates is partly masked by the positive intracohort effect (women have additional children over time). However, the intercohort effect is roughly twice as large as the intracohort effect for the predominantly white Christian traditions, meaning that the lower birth rates of the younger cohorts causes an overall decrease in fertility despite women having more children as they age. This is not true for black Protestantism, whose declining birth rate is completely hidden by the large intracohort slope coefficient, which indicates that more children are born over time. Thus, there is an overall sharp generational decline in birth rates for all traditions. If younger cohorts within black Protestantism have more children as they age (as did their forebears), we may not see the decrease in birth rate suggested by the large intercohort effect.

DISCUSSION

Our evidence suggests that those demographics that distinguish Niebuhr's "religion of the disinherited," namely, lower social class, southern, and rural residence, are the very demographics that are slowly converging among the major Christian traditions in the United States. Our trend analysis demonstrates this pattern clearly and supports the research that shows a decline of class and regional differences among the major religious traditions (Niebuhr 1929; Roof and McKinney 1987). Second, we point out that the additional demographic characteristics that have been found to distinguish Christian religious traditions do indeed have some support based on our analyses. Interestingly enough, it is not evangelical Protestantism that is most demographically distinct. Rather, black Protestantism is most demographically distinct on three of four measures (gender distribution, marriage, and birth rates) while mainline Protestantism distinguishes itself as the oldest religious tradition demographically. Given these patterns, we call into question the classical theories that link certain demographic characteristics to certain religious groups. We turn then to these theoretical considerations. Our goal is not to develop a full theory with adequate empirical support at this point, but to encourage such efforts.

Several theories evince a direct causal link between demographic characteristics and certain religious groups. These theories suggest that there is something intrinsic about the group itself (e.g., millenarianism, emotionalism, orthodoxy) that is more attractive to the disinherited. The most popular of these focus on the link between social class and sectarian denominations, although they are applicable to religious traditions as well. For example, "compensation" theory suggests that the otherworldly emphasis of sects provides compensation for deficiencies on earth through rewards in heaven. In Liston Pope's words, sects "substitute religious status for social status" (1942:147). Glock (1964) widened the class-sect link in his theory of deprivation. Deprivation, he argued, is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for protest, and sects are a form of protest against the social structure. Deprivation is not limited to economic deprivation, since it can take various forms (economic, social, organismic, ethical, psychic). Other theories suggest direct causal connections between rurality and immigrant status and sectarian religion.[14]

We agree with Stark and Finke (2000) that the evidence from recent research clearly indicates that these theories are inadequate (see also Wilson 1982). First, many studies show that sectarian religious groups "are remarkably heterogeneous in terms of social status" (Stark and Finke 2000:198). At best, class has a weak effect on religious affiliation, since both the rich and poor are

attracted to sects. In fact, some sectarian growth fueled by revivalism filled congregations with both rich and poor (e.g., Johnson 1978). Second, cults attract privileged members even though they have the sectarian qualities of tension with society and (often) make high demands (Stark 1996). In addition, the privileged are not underrepresented among the most committed to sectarian religion.[15]

We are not saying that there is no "direct link" between certain demographics and religious traditions, only that (1) present theories describing this relationship are incomplete, and (2) that they have limited utility past the first generation. We agree with Stark and Finke that, at least in the last 50 years, demographic effects are "very modest" in the United States (2000:198), and our analysis supports this claim. As they suggest, indirectly causal links such as socialization (which are based on theories that do not directly connect the characteristics of a religious group to the demographics of their constituency), have much stronger effects on religious affiliation than demographics (Stark and Finke 2000:198; Sherkat 1991; Hadaway and Marler 1993).

Dominant in this literature is that people normally join or affiliate with religious (and nonreligious) groups because of relationships. The stronger the relationships formed with those inside the religious group, the more likely they are to join (Stark and Finke 2000). Thus, the effects of marriage, parent's affiliation, and other social constraints are very strong in religious "switching" or "joining" (Musick and Wilson 1995; Sander 1993; McRae 1983; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). People convert when they have strong affective bonds with those inside the group (Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Snow and Machalek 1984), not primarily because sectarian beliefs and rules resonate with their demographic characteristics. In fact, full acceptance of a sect's tenets is often subsequent to involvement in the sect, if indeed full acceptance is ever achieved (e.g., Bainbridge 1992).

Nonetheless, demographic distinctives still persist. Specifically, lower-class members are disproportionately represented in sects, as are women and ethnic/racial minorities (Stark and Finke 2000). If demographic factors are not strongly correlated with religious tradition, and if theoretical links between demographics and tradition (particularly lower social class and sectarian affiliation) are incomplete, why do demographic distinctives persist, and why are some slowly weakening as our research shows?

In keeping with our argument above, we think the reason demographics continue to distinguish religious groups has more to do with the enduring nature of relational networks than with "direct links" between disinherited social position and sectarian beliefs or boundaries. Put another way, friends and family members of sectarians, who are the primary sources of new affiliates, tend to be of similar social status. Other factors related to networks and subcultural boundaries are also pertinent.[16]

This leads us to answer the question of why we found slow demographic convergence among the Christian traditions in the United States. Globalizing forces weaken the effect of some demographic distinctives, and to a limited extent have homogenized a large portion of the American population. The increases in transience and mobility, the spread and availability of information technology, the ubiquity of media, the greater availability and participation in higher education, and greater ethnic and religious pluralism tend to erode the once unique demographic characteristics of religious groups. The relational networks of individuals are increasingly heterogeneous, and location of residence is additionally less constraining. As a result, certain demographic distinctives, particularly those related to social status, will slowly converge.

Finally, it is important that we say something about one demographic that will continue to distinguish religious groups and seems most impermeable, that of race. The "enduring color line" of Niebuhr's time has not changed much over the century and research continues to demonstrate that race is a means of maintaining structural inequalities (Omi and Winant 1994, Wilson 1980). In fact, our analysis suggests that even African-American *religious* communities remain demographically distinct in relation to other Christian traditions. In the context of relational networks, this demographic distinctiveness illustrates the isolation of African Americans in self-contained

realms of poverty that are fairly removed from the globalizing forces that are homogenizing the predominantly white Christian traditions. Few congregations are racially heterogeneous, suggesting that racial and religious subcultures have limited relational networks through which new adherents are attracted to religious groups (Emerson and Smith 2000).

If race is a more significant religious distinctive than class or other demographic lines, we would expect (white) evangelical Protestantism to be less demographically distinct, once the sizable number of African-American Protestants are separated from this tradition. Our denominational data present a profile between that of Hunter (1983) and Smith et al. (1998), and indicate that the differences between their demographic profiles have little to do with change over time, since relative change has been slow. Instead, the change is likely related to differences in definitional strategy.[17] Our year-by-year analysis shows that in the 1990s, evangelical Protestants are not disproportionately old, female, uneducated, rural, nor do they have significantly higher birth rates, in comparison to mainline Protestantism and Catholicism. They have slightly lower incomes and are more likely to be married and to reside in the south. Overall, black Protestantism is distinct and represents "the disinherited" in the United States insofar as (1) African Americans maintain their religious commitments with this tradition and (2) structural inequality follows racial lines where African Americans are comparatively poor and uneducated (Omi and Winant 1994).

Clearly there are limitations to this study that call for further research. The implications of our findings on demographic convergence for church-sect theory are modest because religious traditions do not perfectly align the church-sect typology. The claims of class differences between religious groups as defined and analyzed here are weakening (except between black Protestantism and the predominantly white Christian traditions). Additionally, further research in this area of religion and demography should include a trend analysis of demographic patterns at the congregational level, which may provide insight into the interplay of relational networks and socioeconomic status and the similarities or differences that may appear across denominations. Also, the inclusion of immigration and immigrant groups may provide some understanding into the demographic shifts that have taken place and continue to transform congregations and entire religious traditions. These considerations and perhaps others may help to better account for trends reported in this article.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, 26 years of GSS data were used to analyze the demographic profiles of four Christian traditions in the United States over time. These data show that those demographics of Niebuhr's "disinherited" (education, income, southern location, population size) are converging. That is, the four religious traditions are becoming more similar on these demographics. We do not want to overstate this finding. The convergence has been slow and these Christian traditions still differ significantly. However, our decomposition of aging and cohort effects suggest continued convergence in the future. A different set of demographics, namely age, marriage rates, gender distribution, and birth rates, show no evidence of convergence. Mainline Protestantism's constituency is older, while black Protestantism is distinguished by its disproportionate gender distribution, low marriage rates, and higher birth rates. The religious tradition that is most demographically distinct (and "disinherited") is black Protestantism.

Theories that purport a direct causal link between certain demographics and religious groups do not fit our findings or the substantial research in the area. Religious preferences cross-cut demographic lines. We are not arguing that there is no direct causal connection between demographics and religious traditions, only that it is weak and that other "indirect" links such as socialization and relational networks are stronger effects and better explain this enduring correlation. We invite further research that will refine our preliminary theoretical efforts and expand research in this area.

NOTES

1. The term "evangelical" carries multiple definitions that have merit for different purposes. This study will focus on "evangelicalism" as a religious tradition encompassing those predominantly white Protestant denominations that are relatively theologically conservative. For more detail on our coding of religious traditions, see Steensland et al. (2000).
2. Southern residence here indicates residence in those states considered part of the historical south (AL, AR, DE, GA, FL, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, WV, VA, and the District of Columbia).
3. The Sheffe method tests for significant differences between all pairs of means. It accounts for the increased possibility of a Type I error that results from multiple comparisons (see Brown and Melamed (1990)).
4. Since this model assumes linear change, and since the logit function is a close approximation to linear change when the proportions are close to 0.50, it is important that the proportions are not approaching one or zero. In our case, the most skewed data had about a 0.2/0.8 proportion split (small proportion of Catholics in the south). To check for linearity, we ran the dichotomous demographics (gender, marital status, work status, and south) using OLS regression as well. In each case, they yielded nearly identical results.
5. Oversampling of African-American respondents in certain years has been accounted for through weighting procedures (see Davis and Smith (1996) for more details). Sample sizes for our religious traditions change somewhat from year to year, but never dip below 100 for any tradition on any given year. Although this study does not constitute a longitudinal analysis in the strict sense of examining the same individuals over time, we can determine if there are some general patterns that hold true for this religious tradition even among different samples obtained year after year.
6. We acknowledge that substantial improvements in denominational coding took place in the GSS during the 1980s. For instance, prior to 1984, Baptist and Methodist groups were coded under generic titles listed in the cumulative file as "Baptist Don't Know Which" and "Methodist Don't Know Which." This then increases the likelihood of measurement error in distinguishing evangelical, mainline, and African-American Protestant traditions. Steensland et al. (2000) note, however, that despite this problem, the religious traditions scheme is still a significant improvement, substantively and statistically, over the earlier FUND variable in categorizing the denominations into larger groups.
7. In general, we found considerable fluctuations in the data and concluded that these were likely caused by sampling error and GSS stratified neighborhood cluster sampling (see Davis and Smith (1996) for details on this procedure). This approach allowed us to present "change over time" in terms of (linear) regression slope coefficients.
8. In the table, the regression slopes are the best estimate of average yearly change. However, in the case of dichotomous demographic variables where logistic regression is used, these slope estimates are less accurate estimates of average yearly change because of the curvilinear nature of the data. For this reason, multiplying the slope coefficient by 26 (the number of years covered in the sample) gives a less accurate estimate of the total cumulative change in the logistic regressions (for female, married, south), while the OLS (linear) regressions are more accurate.
9. We considered the possibility that changes in income due to inflation might be masked in our comparisons across the religious traditions. For instance, there are no significant differences in income between 1993–1998 according to these data. This is partly because of the 12-point income scale that peaks with the "over $25,000" category, which "flattens" the slope for Catholics and mainline Protestants particularly. We checked means for the combined 1991–1996 samples using the "Income91" variable, which has 21 categories with a top category of "$75000+." There is no significant difference between Catholics and mainline Protestants (15.18 and 15.20, respectively), but evangelicals were significantly lower (14.12) and African-American Protestants were significantly lower than the predominantly white traditions (11.90). We feel, therefore, that the pattern in these findings is consistent with the original income variable findings and that no further qualifications are needed.
10. Although the GSS sampling strategy likely oversamples African-American women, there is still a higher percentage of women sampled among African-American Protestants than among African-American non-Protestants (N = 1,225; percent female = 57.1; slope = 0.023).
11. The demographic "age" is not used in Table 1 for the obvious reason that it is collinear with the change over time we are examining.
12. We chose this method—instead of subtracting the 1998 mean from the 1972 mean—because it "smoothes out" the year-to-year fluctuations of the demographic means, giving a more accurate estimate of total change. There are significant fluctuations in demographic means from year to year. If the 1972 and 1998 means are too high or low relative to the overall trend, then the difference between their respective means may give an inaccurate estimate of

overall change. When we computed total change by the difference between the mean in 1972 and 1998, we found that total change often differed significantly from the sum of the intracohort and intercohort effects, particularly for those demographic variables that varied little over time. Firebaugh notes that the intracohort and intercohort effects should sum to approximate the overall effect (1997). In personal communication with Firebaugh, he recommended that we estimate total change using the regression coefficient as the best estimate of yearly change, in order to "smooth out" the yearly fluctuations in the data.

13. It may be that younger evangelicals are more likely to be married because there are a higher percentage of "older" evangelicals within this cohort, thus marital status is a function of age. However, we examined smaller age categories (18–24, 25–34) and found that the percentage of married evangelicals (32 percent) is similar to that of other religious traditions (African-American Protestant 33 percent, mainline Protestant 29 percent, Catholic 33 percent). Thus, it does not appear that this difference can be accounted for by age.

14. For example, Liston Pope presents a theoretical connection between rural-to-urban migration and attraction to sects, since the sect offers them a defense against the "culture shock" of their new urban environment. S. D. Clark (1948) argues for a strong causal link between rural location and sectarianism (see also Mann 1955). Others link ethnic groups to sectarianism, since the religious groups of ethnic/racial minorities meet ethnic needs (e.g., Yang 1998).

15. Correlation analysis of the GSS data set show that education and income are positively correlated with church attendance for evangelical Protestants (not significant for African-American Protestants), indicating that committed sectarians are not disproportionately poor (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

16. The location of the congregation may be an important effect (that may be weakening with increased transience and community transformation, e.g., Ammerman 1997). If the congregation is located in a poor community, primarily poor people attend. Obviously, then, if a sect's congregations are primarily located in poor communities, counties, or regions, the sect will have an enduring demographic distinctive of poor affiliates. It may be that demographics (with the exception of race) distinguish *congregations* more than *denominations or religious traditions*, just as demographics vary significantly within regions and counties.

17. Hunter defines evangelicals as those who adhere to a set of conservative beliefs, while Smith et al. uses a self-identification strategy (1998:82–83, footnote 4). For a helpful discussion of the effects in religious group composition based on differing methodological strategies, see Woodberry and Smith (1998).

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