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STEPHEN J. STEIN

The Changing Economy of the Spiritual  
Marketplace in the United States

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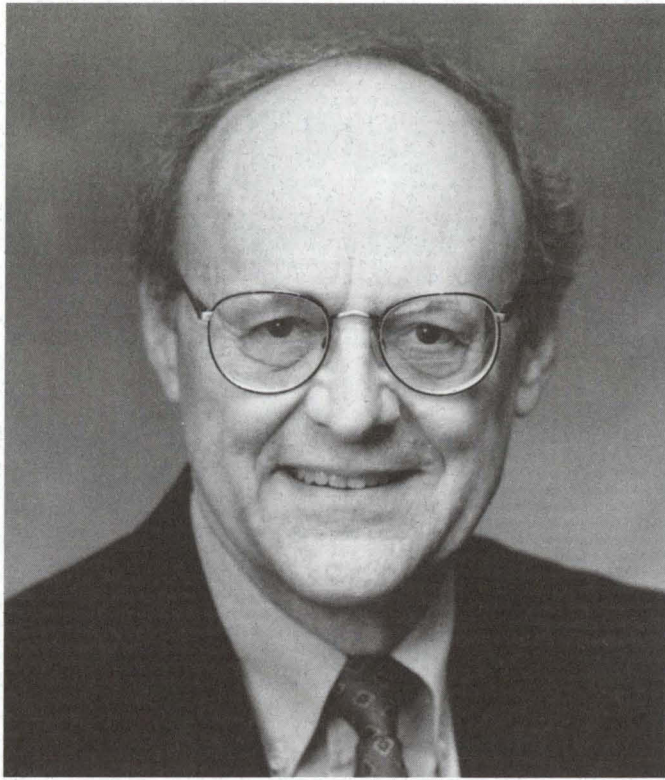
**The Changing Economy of the Spiritual Marketplace  
in the United States**

**STEPHEN J. STEIN**

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Stephen J. Stein received his graduate education in American religious history from Yale University and joined Indiana University faculty in 1970. A Chancellors' Professor of Religious Studies and Adjunct Professor of History, Professor Stein, a specialist in eighteenth-century religious thought, is the editor of two volumes in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* published by Yale University Press: *Apocalyptic Writings* (1977) and *Notes on Scripture* (1998). He is currently completing a third, an edition of Edwards's "Blank Bible," a comprehensive scriptural commentary. He has published extensively in the subfield of American sectarian studies, including *Letters from a Young Shaker: William S. Byrd at Pleasant Hill* (Kentucky, 1985) and *Alternative American Religions* (Oxford, 2000). His volume, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (Yale, 1992), recipient of the Schaff Prize from the American Society of Church History, is widely regarded as the definitive study of the Shakers. He is also editor of *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, volume 3 in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (Continuum, 1998). Professor Stein served as President of the American Society of Church History in 1994. He has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as the College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Faculty Award and Indiana University's Tracy M. Sonneborn Award for Excellence in Teaching and Research.

# The Changing Economy of the Spiritual Marketplace in the United States

Stephen J. Stein

“Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” First Amendment

Economists report that nearly fifty percent of American families today have some form of investments in the market—some in directly-owned stocks, some in mutual funds, some in retirement accounts. That means that many of the readers of this essay are likely to pay some attention to the financial markets in a regular way. Here are the numbers at the close of the New York Stock exchange on September 29, 2000, the day on which this lecture was given: the Dow Jones Industrial Average was off 173.51, ending at 10,655; the Nasdaq closed at 3672, down 105.92; the Standard and Poor’s 500 ended the day down at 1436. Throughout that Friday, CBS MarketWatch.com featured commentary on bleak earnings forecasts by Apple and United Air Lines, implying a likely impact on the markets. Those predictions were borne out.

I am in a profession that watches with equal interest and intensity the “spiritual marketplace” in the United States. In this arena, too, market watchers are numerous, though quite frankly, less agreement exists among analysts about religious indices than among analysts about financial indices. And the latter, as you know, are notoriously divided in their judgments.

I am tempted to push the market metaphor to its limits, suggesting that ministers, priests, and rabbis are brokers for their respective communities, hoping to persuade potential clients to buy into their products, and equally desirous that those already on board will invest more deeply. Religious leaders recognize that they are operating in a competitive marketplace, even though this is veiled in spiritual and theological language. Religious commodities offer both short-term benefits and long-term returns which are described in explicit ways by these brokers, ranging from promises of dividends in the present to visions of rewards in the hereafter. Market share is also not unimportant to these communities. All parties watch with interest the arrival of new commodities on the exchange. Religious stocks rise and fall with the same unpredictable rhythms that move economic markets. The indices that chart the ups and downs include membership figures, financial statements, the number of local chapters, the number of new starts, etc. Professional observers of the spiritual marketplace

watch closely all of these statistics, and from these data they offer judgments concerning the changing spiritual economy.

In all fairness to you, the reader, I need to describe where I stand as I offer the following observations. I am not a broker in the spiritual marketplace: I am a historian of religion in America. My own research has focused on several topics, including eighteenth-century religious thought, religious movements known as outsider groups (alternative religions, or sects and cults), and themes and movements associated with millennialism and apocalypticism. I teach across the full chronological spectrum of religious life from colonial times to the present. I am religiously, philosophically, and politically committed to the principle of religious diversity in our nation. I am critical enough of the world we inhabit to suggest that we in America are a long way from fully achieving the stated constitutional principle of free exercise. But I am also proud of what has been accomplished in the United States in this regard. And I am hopeful that the American experiment in religious liberty, now more than two hundred years in process, will yet achieve its objective fully.

Every reader of this essay also occupies a unique vantage point from which to view the religious marketplace in America and from which to offer judgments about it. Some, no doubt, may well be participants, or investors, in it. Mixed reactions to the following observations are therefore appropriate, welcome, and encouraged.

The point I wish to make in this essay is that I agree with those observers of American religious life who are reporting dramatic signs of shifting patterns and real change in the contemporary spiritual marketplace. In what follows, I will identify five specific forces operating in this religious market. I will examine some of the data supporting these trends. And I will, in closing, offer a few observations about the likely implications of all this for the future. In this essay I intend to exploit the metaphor and the language of the marketplace because they are rich, nuanced, and familiar, and also because the religious situation in contemporary America reflects some of the same dynamics and operating principles.<sup>1</sup> So—what are the forces at work?

\* \* \* \* \*

Diversification is the first force I see operating in the spiritual marketplace. In the economic sphere it is standard counsel for investors to build a portfolio of investments from more than one commodity. To diversify is to position yourself to take advantage of the inevitable fluctuations in the market, to reduce the risks of being over-invested in a few commodities or funds, to buffer against potential pain from volatility. Precisely how to build the perfect portfolio is a matter of much debate, but in the world of finance, diversification is a hedge against risk

and loss. In the spiritual marketplace, diversification often has had a different ring for many. Rather than being the natural positive product of the constitutional principle of the free exercise of religion, many have seen religious diversification, or accelerating pluralism, as creating problems.

It used to be relatively easy to describe the religious make-up of the United States, or so it seemed. For example, at the time of the formation of the nation, the vast majority of the more than four million citizens was identified with Protestant-oriented Christian traditions, although they were not necessarily zealous, regular, or even occasional participants in those Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Baptist, or Quaker communities. At that time there were only some 25,000 Roman Catholics, and several thousand Jews. Those who wrote about such matters back then tended to ignore the presence of indigenous Native American peoples with their distinctive religious traditions, as well as the imported African traditions that came with Black slaves. Commentators also frequently ridiculed and condemned the new religious sects that arrived on the scene, branding them with such terms of opprobrium as "enthusiasts," and declaring their preaching and worship "extravagant," "boisterous," and "superstitious."<sup>2</sup>

By 1860 the religious population was changing dramatically, thanks to expanding immigration. At the start of the Civil War, the largest single denomination was the Roman Catholic Church. The decades following the war saw new waves of southern and eastern European immigrants flood into the country, bringing more Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Jews, from a complex mix of ethnic backgrounds. The twentieth century witnessed continuing and accelerating change, the product of more immigration and of the birth of scores of new religious movements within the United States. During the first half of that century, Protestants of every possible stripe, Roman Catholics, and Jews remained or became prominent and dominant.<sup>3</sup>

In 1955 the sociologist Will Herberg felt comfortable writing about America's religious situation, using the threefold division of *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*.<sup>4</sup> In his judgment, the three faiths shared a great deal despite traditional differences. The next decade, the 1960s, however, revealed the inadequacies of that three-faith construction, as Americans (especially the young, and often the educated) responded to the cultural shifts of the "Sixties" by joining all kinds of new and different religious movements. They became Jesus People, (as they were called), "Moonies" (another disparaging term), Hare Krishnas, Black Muslims, Charismatics, Transcendental Meditators. All of these groups at one time or another seized the headlines and caught the public eye.<sup>5</sup> Suddenly the threefold division in Herberg's scheme, which he represented as a comfortable sharing of the American way and the result of what he called the "triple melting pot," no longer reflected reality. The new religious diversity was increasingly viewed by

many as threatening the alleged "Judeo-Christian" character of America. It was no accident that the 1970s and the 1980s witnessed a resurgence of conservative evangelicalism, intent on creating a Christian moral majority.<sup>6</sup>

But the religious pluralism of the 1960s does not compare with the religious diversity that exists at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup> Protestant denominations, once dominant, no longer occupy the same positions in our society. The most dramatic statistical change involves the size of the Roman Catholic Church (61,200,000, according to 1998 figures, nearly 39% of all church members in the United States, or about one of every four citizens). The largest Protestant body in 1998 was a mere fourth of that number. The Southern Baptist Convention had 15,700,000, or 9.8% of all church members. More significantly, what historians have called mainstream Protestant communities are all experiencing steady statistical losses in membership. The United Methodist Church, the third largest denomination in the United States, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Protestant Episcopal Church of the U.S.A., and the American Baptist Churches—all are losing net members.<sup>8</sup>

The composition of the spiritual marketplace is changing. Among the ten largest denominations in America are four African-American communities—the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the Church of God in Christ, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc. Equally significant is the presence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Utah-based Mormons, in the top-ten.<sup>9</sup> Nowhere to be seen among these largest denominations is the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. or the United Church of Christ, the two primary offspring of the legally established churches of the colonial era.

But the process of diversification has an even more dramatic aspect. The two largest non-Christian religious groups in the United States are the Jews (3,850,000 listed as members in 1998), and the Muslims (3,332,000 in 1998). The latter—Islam—is experiencing rapid growth, making it likely soon (say demographers) to be the second largest religious group in our nation after Christianity. Other numbers documenting the changing religious diversification in America are the 1,285,000 Hindus and 565,000 Buddhists listed in 1998. The same source providing these figures, the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, listed some 1,439,000 "New-Religionists," a category that is a catch-all for a variety of small highly divergent religious groups.<sup>10</sup>

Religious diversity, unfortunately, is not uniformly celebrated in our nation today. Two examples from very different sectors of the religious world document some of the contemporary opposition to religious pluralism. Christian Reconstructionism, a movement identified with the Protestant Christian right, hopes to transform American society using principles articulated in the



Pentateuch, or first five books of the Bible. Its goal is a nation that will be exclusively Christian and biblically conservative. In their literature Reconstructionists have attacked non-Christians, non-believers of all varieties, and also liberal Christians, declaring religious pluralism a "heresy."<sup>11</sup> Within the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church in America the attack on pluralism has taken a more intramural character. Conservative Catholics have charged liberals in the church with mistakenly equating the Second Vatican Council's openness to pluralism as an invitation to theological dissent. The resulting wave of diverse liberal views on controversial issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and the ordination of women has led, in their judgment, to serious inroads by relativism. The solution, for these Catholics, is a return to a unity of theological outlook.<sup>12</sup> For both Reconstructionists and conservative Catholics, religious pluralism is not a positive principle.

What is most striking about contemporary religious diversity is the fact that it is no longer accurate to talk about American religion in the old ways. Among the inadequate descriptors for the United States are a "Christian nation," a "Judeo-Christian culture," a society dominated by a Protestant mainstream, a "Protestant-Catholic-Jewish society," or even a monotheistic nation. Scholars and others working in the field today are struggling to formulate new and more accurate models, concepts, and images to describe this radically decentered, diversified religious world in America.<sup>13</sup> In this present context I find the marketplace model promising.

\* \* \* \* \*

A second force operating in the contemporary religious marketplace is globalization. In the world of American finance, investors no longer focus exclusively on the United States. In our global economy, markets featuring developing regions of the world are often among the most attractive. Asian and Latin American funds offer choices consistent with the notion that no nation stands alone economically. We have come to expect international financial news. Regular listeners to "Marketplace" on PRI often hear the closing figures from the Nikkei Index and other foreign exchanges. Globalization is not just a product of shrinking distances or better communications. It is based on the recognition that we live in a world where national boundaries matter less and less, where commerce moves across borders almost as though they do not exist.

In like manner, globalization is reshaping America's religious commerce. I have given above some statistics in the aggregate bearing on the number of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists in the United States. In addition to those groups there are now significant numbers of Sikhs, Confucians, Bahaists, Jains, Shintoists, and Chinese folk religionists in the United States. Estimating precise

numbers for many of these groups, including Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, is very difficult because often they are not organized in denominational fashion.<sup>14</sup>

Equally significant are the African Caribbean religious groups present in substantial numbers in the United States, including communities featuring traditional religious practices such as Santeria and Voodoo. Santeria, derived from the ritual life of the Yorubas from Africa as reconstructed in response to the Catholicism of Cuba where they were enslaved, features communication between *orishas* (spirits) and their devotees under the guidance of priests or priestesses. Sacrifices, feasting, dancing, and music play central roles in santeria practices. Hundreds of thousands of devotees, it is estimated, are present in the United States, most of whom are immigrants from Cuba. Voodoo, a religion originating in Haiti, combines West African traditions with elements of Roman Catholicism. This religious tradition began in covert meetings among enslaved Africans and also features ritual service to spirits (*lwa*) as well as spirit possession of devotees in trances and dances. It, too, has arrived in the United States via immigrants.<sup>15</sup>

But the globalization of American religion does not require passage across an ocean. The growing Latino population in the United States and the continuing immigration of large numbers of Latin Americans are, for example, reshaping the character of the Roman Catholic Church in this nation and also adding substantial numbers to Protestant and Pentecostal communities. Census estimates project that Latinos will be nearly fifteen percent of the country's population in 2020, or approximately 47 million. The explosion of Spanish-speaking members in America's churches, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, is now affecting the ways in which spiritual and religious resources are administered. Lay initiatives, in particular, are rising in importance in the face of shrinking numbers of priests and nuns. Institutional changes shaped by these factors appear inevitable in the future.<sup>16</sup>

Religious globalization in the United States is not something new. The United States is a nation of immigrants, a society comprised entirely of individuals or offspring of individuals who have come to these shores, from the earliest Native Americans down to the most recent arrivals from Bosnia, Cuba, or wherever. Each wave or tide of newcomers has come with religious traditions. Curiously, Americans quickly forget their own immigrant experience and resent and resist the arrival of newer Americans. Euro-Americans, for example, have been the primary advocates of legal restrictions against potential immigrants from other parts of the world, even though at times they have been willing to allow Africans, Asians, or Hispanics into the country as slaves or cheap laborers. Legal barriers to immigration often have been motivated, in part, by condemnation of

the religious traditions accompanying the new immigrants. The Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, for example, which effectively ended immigration from all of Asia except the Philippines and Japan until it was rescinded in 1965, was motivated and supported by both racial and religious intolerance in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

But changes have taken place over the past fifty years, effected by a variety of forces. Three military conflicts with Asian nations—Japan, North Korea, and North Vietnam—changed the situation forever—changes that are still underway in the world of commerce. With military, cultural, and economic exchanges have come increased religious commerce. No longer are Buddhism and Hinduism exotic or distant. In many a set of yellow pages, listings for those religious traditions are found side by side with listings for Methodism and Lutheranism.<sup>18</sup>

But the globalization of American religion is not simply the product of increased immigration, though that has been an especially important factor since 1965. The most interesting (and for some, the most threatening) aspect of this process is the success of newly imported religious traditions at gaining converts among the non-immigrant portions of the population. The success of Islam, for example, among African-Americans has received considerable attention since the 1960s when the unorthodox Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad and his powerful lieutenant Malcolm X captured national attention. Now the Muslim presence in America is not confined to African-Americans, Middle Eastern immigrants, or prominent professional athletes.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the prominence of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), better known as the Hare Krishnas, has been a product of the success of their missionary efforts. The founder Abhay Charan De, Swami Prabhupada to his disciples, came from India in 1965 and began teaching a focused intense devotion to Krishna, first in New York City and then in San Francisco. He enjoyed his greatest initial success among the youthful members of the counterculture who devoted themselves to the service of Krishna. ISKCON's enterprises included temples in major cities, vegetarian restaurants, and rural communes. Prabhupada's death in 1977 was followed by a time of internal turmoil over leadership. Subsequent stability and numerical increases in the sect were a by-product of the influx of Asian-Indian Hindus who were attracted to ISKCON temples and rituals.<sup>20</sup>

The globalization of American religion has become evident for other reasons. In the 1960s and 1970s Americans began to pay more attention to Buddhism and Hinduism, in part, because a number of celebrities toyed with these spiritual disciplines and religious traditions. The Beatles helped Mahareshi Yogi and Transcendental Meditation enjoy a moment in the spotlight. That kind of celebrity-driven attention still exists—witness the press given to Richard Gere's commitment to Buddhism.<sup>21</sup> There are, however, other more telling signs of

religious change in contemporary America. The attention directed to the travels of the Dalai Lama, his reception by and interaction with other religious leaders, and even the commentary regarding his recent exclusion from the Religious Summit at the United Nations mark a new level of popular acceptance of Buddhism in our society.<sup>22</sup> But it is more significant as a formal measure of institutional recognition that in 1987 the first Buddhist chaplain was commissioned in the Armed forces. In a very different religious world, the courts have acknowledged the rights of Santeria communities to sacrifice animals ritually in violation of animal abuse laws.<sup>23</sup> These developments represent legal recognition of global religious realities within our contemporary world. The presence of hundreds of worship centers for these imported traditions, located in suburbs across the nation, is additional evidence of dramatic change. Endowed chairs at public universities focusing on Asian and Middle Eastern religious traditions, established with funding from private donors and public corporations, document the desire of Americans of all ethnic and spiritual backgrounds for their religious traditions to receive the same serious study accorded Christian and Jewish traditions.<sup>24</sup>

Economic globalization has its critics, of course; economic nationalism still has proponents in such movements as "Buy America." But, as many recognize, today it is virtually impossible to separate the national from the international. How many know that Barnes and Noble is owned by a German firm, or that Paine Webber is a Swiss subsidiary? How many care? Similarly, for many people, the ultimate measure of the worth of a religion is not its origins, but its benefits to participating individuals and to the larger community.

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A third force effecting changes in the spiritual marketplace is privatization. At least two notions of privatization exist in the economic sphere. One involves the suggestion that certain responsibilities traditionally in the realm of government might be handled more efficiently by private enterprise, such as prisons, airports, trash pick-up, and other "services." The second relates to the attempt by small entrepreneurs to gain a piece of the economic action traditionally controlled by large corporations. Both call for the breakup of controlling interests and the redistribution of resources and profits.

In the 1970s and 1980s the religious world was taken aback by the success of the televangelists, what scholars called the "electronic church." Television preachers invaded American homes with powerful preaching, lively music, healing rituals, and other promised benefits.<sup>25</sup> The established denominations lagged far behind in their use of television. Many observers feared that funds

solicited on those broadcasts would drain resources from local churches and national denominations, and they probably did. Millions of viewers developed "personal relationships" with television personalities. Fears were expressed concerning the impact of the electronic church on conventional, institutional religion in America. While televangelism continues today, the sheen is gone, darkened by the scandals that toppled several leading preachers.<sup>26</sup>

However, a new, more far-reaching process of religious privatization is underway today—on the Internet—the functional equivalent of the dot.coms that are transforming the economic marketplace. The same technological revolution is affecting both the business world and the religious world. Websites are transforming the ways in which religious options are marketed to the public. In both worlds a high premium is placed on the creative use of developing technologies.<sup>27</sup>

Among the most successful applications of computer technology in the field of contemporary religion are those websites broadly classified as "New Age Religion." The New Age Movement eludes precise definition because it is comprised of a wide variety of individuals, organizations, ideas, and practices, most of which are uncomfortable being linked closely with others. New Age is both old and new, old in the sense that there are precedents in such nineteenth-century movements as New Thought and Theosophy, but new in so far as its diverse proponents often reject any notion of being an "organized religion." In fact, the term "religion" is offensive to many New Agers who prefer to represent themselves as involved in a spiritual movement rather than a religion. New Age "spirituality" is therefore the proper category, from their perspective.<sup>28</sup>

The world of New Age spirituality includes occult practices, such as astrology; psychic activity linked with tarot cards and palm-reading; spiritualism (or communication with spirits), whether through channelling, telepathic activities, or traditional seances; health and healing practices, from classic faith healing, to holistic medical routines, chiropractic, aromatherapy, acupuncture, and the use of crystals; disciplines drawing on ancient wisdom from Eastern religions, pre-Christian Western religions, or other mystical or metaphysical traditions. Closely associated with New Age are expressions of the Neopagan movement, with its reconstruction of spiritualities from such sources as Wiccan and Celtic religions.<sup>29</sup>

The New Age movement possesses a deep animus against organized religion and, as a result, has evolved a set of distinctive alternative institutional expressions: publishers and book stores, conventions, workshops, and seminars structure the movement, rather than churches and congregations. Seasonal festivals linked to the rhythms of nature are also common. New Agers have

identified closely with a number of social causes including women's rights, the peace movement, and environmentalism.<sup>30</sup>

The Internet is the perfect instrument for the New Age movement. By means of the Internet, New Age prophets and entrepreneurs are able to reach individuals in the privacy of their homes, to present their teachings and spiritual disciplines without the surrounding voice of their critics, to sell their literature and diverse religious paraphernalia directly. The Web allows a new kind of free market in spiritual wares. A short time ago that kind of access did not exist. This diverse movement has been most successful in gaining adherents among the educated and the financially well off portion of the population.

It is virtually impossible to generalize about New Age websites, though many display appealing messages, technological sophistication, and a variety of goods and services for sale. For example, the School of Spiritual Integrity founded by the Rev. Kythera Ann, a native Californian, features the "harmony of life" as its overall objective. The "ministry" of this New Age prophet, who is both a channeler and a clairvoyant, utilizes distance learning courses as well as classes and workshops at both her headquarters and at other locations to which she travels. This "school" advertises instruction in metaphysical disciplines and diverse related topics—from angels, chakras, and crystals, to dreams, kabbalah, and sacred geometry. The publications and paraphernalia required for these spiritual disciplines are also readily available for purchase over the Internet.<sup>31</sup>

Among New Age listings on the Internet are some options that challenge more traditional definitions of spirituality. For example, a little known movement identified as "Breatharianism" seeks to promote a dietary discipline that results in spiritual cleansing. Founded by Ellen Greve, an Australian woman known to her followers as Jasmuheen, this movement calls for living on light while reducing dependence on food and liquids. Jasmuheen contends that when properly trained, individuals may achieve enlightenment, eternal youth, resistance to disease, and sexual satisfaction through this routine. She also represents the movement as a viable potential solution to world hunger. Jasmuheen spreads her ideas through books and videos as well as through the use of the Internet.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout much of the 1990s the New Age movement was a favorite target of conservative religious critics.<sup>33</sup> In fact, a few years ago some observers were ready to write the epitaph of the movement (which may be a bit like the predictions concerning dot.coms today). But the Internet has given it new life. Now each of these highly diverse forms of New Age religion has the capacity to constitute a private virtual community, drawing together participants from every corner of the country, potentially from every corner of the globe. And the participants, if they wish, can keep their commitment completely private.

The fourth factor operating in the spiritual marketplace is localization. My first thoughts on localization in the economic sphere did not yield useful ideas; I thought of the new economy cutting into the action dominated by the large corporations of the old economy. But I realized, as the Nasdaq shows, the ultimate goal of small dot.coms is to become large and dominant. In the economic sphere, therefore, the Walmarts, the Borders, the Home Depots, and the Staples of the world continue to be the controlling operative models. In the world of commerce, localization generally appears the victim of the success of large corporations.

The situation in the spiritual marketplace seems opposite. There are diminishing institutional loyalties in the area of religion to ecumenical, denominational, or even regional religious agencies. The evidence is clear on several levels that national and international religious organizations are in serious trouble. Ecumenical agencies such as the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches are having difficulty generating or sustaining enthusiasm for their activities as well as raising funds to support their programs. National denominations are experiencing similar problems. These organizations, the professionals who staff them, the programs they direct—all depend on support from state and local units—affiliated churches, congregations, parishes, temples, and synagogues. During the past decade it has been common to hear of denominational budgets slashed, personnel laid off at national offices, pension funds in jeopardy, missionary and educational activities cut back.<sup>34</sup>

A corollary of this trend is the changing pattern of personal identification in contemporary America. More than one observer has noted that religion is less frequently a primary form of self-identification today. How many of you would be quick to say when asked, "Tell me about yourself," that you are first and foremost a Methodist, a Catholic, a Jew? Ethnic consciousness has risen in the past decades, and that has overshadowed religious identity for many. In the world of professionals, vocational identification seems primary. Maybe that is why the religious identification of the Democratic candidate for Vice President in 2000, Joseph Lieberman, attracted so much initial attention—because religion was his primary identifier; that is an anomaly today.<sup>35</sup>

Where is religious loyalty invested in a time of declining support for national and international religious institutions? First and most obviously, loyalties remain firmly attached to local congregations, parishes, synagogues, and temples. Americans continue to attend and support local religious communities in astonishingly high numbers, as periodic Gallup polls document, especially

when compared with other parts of the world. Religious commitment continues strong even in the face of the apparent secularization of American culture. Cultural critics, who regularly point to crime rates, drug use, violence in the media, changing sexual mores, and other negative social factors, do not reckon sufficiently with the continuing strength of local religious communities.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to that continuing support, several “new” kinds of local religious institutions have been developing over the past decade: megachurches, house churches, and cell churches. Each in its own way bids for the loyalties of its members and focuses those loyalties on the local situation. Among these, most attention has been given to the “megachurches,” a term referring to very large unaffiliated congregations developing in urban and suburban centers around the nation. These non-denominational Protestant communities usually feature powerful charismatic preachers, a team of ministers with diverse responsibilities, a participatory style of casual worship that is overtly entertaining, and a host of auxiliary organizations catering to the concerns of every possible age or interest group, from pre-schoolers, through single parents, to retirees. Perhaps the best known megachurch in America is Willow Creek in South Barrington, Illinois, northwest of Chicago—one locale President Bill Clinton used to reflect ruefully on his Monica Lewinski escapades.<sup>37</sup> The most striking evidence of the megachurches is their physical presence on the landscape. It is almost impossible to drive on interstates looping around the major cities of this nation without seeing these huge complexes, auditorium- or gymnasium-like in architectural style, surrounded by massive parking lots. The megachurches are thriving as expressions of localization.<sup>38</sup>

On a much smaller scale, scattered groups of Christians gather in house “churches” or cell churches, taking on themselves the religious functions normally exercised by clergy. These lay-oriented groups are an even clearer expression of localization because they often reject long-standing denominational practices. They represent a form of do-it-yourself church, driven in some measure by motives similar to those energizing the “home-school” movement—a distrust of established institutions and a desire for direct control.<sup>39</sup>

One other different expression of religious localization is the phenomenon of Marian apparitions within the Roman Catholic community in America. These appearances of the Virgin Mary (patterned after similar phenomena at sites around the world, including Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, and Medjugorje) have taken place throughout the United States, including such locations as Bayside, New York; Conyers, Georgia; and South Phoenix, Arizona. Devotion to the Virgin among Catholics is not new. What is different about these apparitions is the fact that many of the messages received from the Virgin convey a negative critique of the Catholic church as an institution, of its hierarchy, of its official stance on certain social issues, and even of the pope. These revelatory sites have



become local shrines to which pilgrims flock by the tens of thousands. The Roman Catholic Church is torn over its official response to these apparitions, evidence that some see these devotions as problematic and undermining traditional institutional authority.<sup>40</sup>

In the United States, localization has not meant a diminishing of religious activity. On the contrary, it appears responsible for new investments in the spiritual marketplace.

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The fifth and final force is polarization. This is not the term commonly used to describe conflict in economic markets. One is more likely to hear debates about competition or free trade in an open marketplace. I favor use of the term “polarization” over “competition” because it strikes a more accurate note concerning our national religious situation. We tend to think of competition in a positive context. For example, in the world of commerce, it is an article of faith that competition makes the economic system work. The market thrives on competition for the investor’s dollar, for market share, for customer loyalty, for the highest financial ratings. Polarization, by contrast, strikes a more negative note, implying the possibility of potential or real danger.

The positive value of competition is an axiom in the economic sphere. Theoretically, the same ought to be true in the spiritual marketplace. In some sense that is what James Madison had in mind in *The Federalist Papers*, no. 52. When speaking about how religious rights for all might be secured in the new nation, he wrote, that the “degree of security” depends in some way on the number of sects. Where there are many different sects, there is less opportunity for an “unjust combination” working oppression on individual groups.<sup>41</sup> The greater the variety—we might say, the greater the competition—the greater the potential security for the religious rights of all. Theoretically, that is implied in the First Amendment’s “free exercise” clause. “Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the free exercise of religion.” All citizens have the right to be religious or not to be religious, to worship as they please or not to worship at all.

But our national history has demonstrated that the commitment in America to a free and open spiritual marketplace has been rather weak at times. In reality, Americans often have been intolerant of religions other than their own, unwilling to grant parity to new religions, to outsider groups, to alternative spiritualities, to religious ideas and practices that are foreign or strange. The list of sustained hostile campaigns against particular religious traditions is long. It includes campaigns and sustained opposition to Native American religionists, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, groups such as the Jehovah Witnesses, and all varieties of so-called “cults,” whether imported or indigenous in origin.<sup>42</sup> These

are but some of the most notable examples one might cite. Religious competition, in general, has not been welcome in America, even though the First Amendment guarantees to all groups equal access to the spiritual marketplace. The principle of free exercise has historically fueled conflict and polarization.

During the past two decades, that polarization has not always been along traditional denominational lines. Frequently, the conflict has been between religious conservatives and religious liberals, no matter what their denominational affiliations.<sup>43</sup> Today in America deep polarization exists between these two "parties" on such issues as homosexuality and gay rights, family values and the sexual revolution. Similar tensions divide religious conservatives and religious liberals on other controversial issues, such as prayer or Bible-reading in the public schools and the posting of the Ten Commandments in government buildings.<sup>44</sup> Competition in the spiritual marketplace has not produced a congenial, supportive environment for diverse religious views in America. Two particular examples illustrate these divisions among religious groups.

The changing role of women in religion is one of the issues that has polarized religious groups and denominations in contemporary America. This issue derives in part from the changing roles of women in the society at large. Among the particular manifestations of the conflict are divisions over female leadership in churches and synagogues, questions concerning the equality of women and men, and debates focusing on alternative images of God. All of these issues have been addressed by advocates of feminist theology who have underscored and articulated liberating themes in both biblical and historical materials. Conservative religious groups, in turn, have opposed these developments, declaring traditional patterns of subordination and submission for women to be of divine institution. At present there is little middle ground to be found between the liberal and the conservative perspectives on the place of women within American religion.<sup>45</sup>

Abortion is another issue that bitterly divides religious groups in contemporary America. It may be impossible to identify a more divisive issue among warring factions in today's spiritual and cultural wars. Framed both by historical positions that reflect longstanding theological views and by the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision in 1973, the battle between pro-life and pro-choice forces in the larger political and cultural arena also involves opposing religious and moral positions. Religious liberals affirm the rights of women to control decisions concerning reproduction and their bodies, at the same expressing support for privacy and individual freedom. Access for all women to medical services is a part of this position. Among the liberal churches supporting abortion rights are the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Religious conservatives, whether Roman Catholic traditionalists or Protestant Fundamentalists, often regard all abortions, including those designed to save the life of the mother, as gross violations of God's law. The rhetoric on both sides of the debate is at times inflammatory, no doubt contributing to the violence that has been directed against abortion clinics in some localities. Despite the judgment that perhaps the Boomer generation is moving toward some kind of middle ground on the matter, the abortion controversy shows little sign of subsiding.<sup>46</sup>

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Diversification, globalization, privatization, localization, and polarization—five forces operating in America's spiritual marketplace. Perhaps I should let go of the economic metaphor, but now I can't. I'm tempted to look for an equivalent to Alan Greenspan and the Federal Reserve. Some might argue that the Fed puts the lie to the notion of a truly free market system. [That's not my point.] If I were to suggest a parallel in the spiritual marketplace, I would point to the judiciary which is entrusted with the task of interpreting the First Amendment and, by indirection, protecting First Amendment rights, and maybe even encouraging the principle of free exercise.

Now three closing comments.

First, there is no reason to believe that the patterns I have identified are likely to end, or even diminish, in the near future. Religious diversification is accelerating in our nation. The globalization of religious options is not reversible. Spiritual privatization and the localization of religious institutions are both natural developments in such an environment. And the polarization of religious persons and parties over these changes and other issues seems inevitable. None of these processes are new in America: change has been a constant in our national life. We are simply more aware today of what is happening around us, around the nation, and around the world.

Second, in the years ahead the First Amendment is going to be challenged in new, different, and interesting ways. That document was written at a time when religion was structured in public institutions that were overtly religious in intent. The variety of spiritual and religious options available today makes it likely that new and creative interpretations of the Constitution will be needed. We can hope for wise judges to guide the nation through such transitional times.

Finally, technology is transforming our world and the spiritual marketplace. As I said earlier, I am a historian by profession, not a futurist. But it does not take a seer to recognize that the new ways of communicating, of transferring information, of persuading others, of selling goods and services, have immense implications for the religious marketplace. My guess is that in the future the

spiritual economy (a word implying "order" or "arrangement") may look very different from the patterns of today. Who knows? Maybe ten years from now the most important religious institution will be "e.religion," and perhaps, just perhaps, a majority of religious persons will be participating in virtual spiritual communities by attending on-line worship services interactively on their home computers.<sup>47</sup>

## Endnotes

1. The appropriation of economic language by students of American religions is evident, for example, in such works as Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of Puritan New England* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

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5. See, for example, James M. Gustafson, ed., *The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion*, in *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science* [hereafter *Annals*], vol. 387 (Jan. 1970). See also Ronald M. Enroth, Edward E. Ericson, and C. Breckenridge Peters, *The Jesus People: Old-Time Religion in the Age of Aquarius* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1972); John T. Biermans, *The Odyssey of New Religious Movements: Persecution, Struggle, Legitimation: A Case Study of the Unification Church* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); E. Burke Rochford, *Hare Krishna in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*

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7. See Gary Laderman, ed., *Religions of Atlanta: Religious Diversity in the Centennial Olympic City* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996); and Wade Clark Roof, ed., *Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century*, in *Annals*, vol. 558 (July 1998).

8. Eileen W. Lindner, ed., *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 1998* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 7-12.

9. *Ibid.* See also C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990); and Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1999).

10. Lindner, ed., *Yearbook*, 5.

11. Anson Shupe, "Christian Reconstructionism and the Angry Rhetoric of Neo-postmillennialism," in Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, eds., *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 195-199.

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32. The "Breatharian," or Living on Light website, is <http://www.selfempowermentacademy.com.au/light.htm>. One expression of a hostile response to this movement is "Sect Madness: Disciples Starve Themselves to Death," at <http://www.rickross.com/reference/breat/breat11.html>.

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42. For example, see James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Macmillan, 1938); Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987); Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, *Visions of Glory: A History and a Memory of Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978); Anson D. Shupe, Jr., and Donna L. Oliver, *The Anti-Cult Movement in America: A Bibliography and Historical Survey* (New



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47. See Mark U. Edwards, Jr., "Virtual Worship," in *The Christian Century*, vol. 117, no. 34 (Dec. 6, 2000), 1262, which describes the virtual worship site, [www.zchurch.com](http://www.zchurch.com), of the ministry at Bethel Temple in Evansville, Indiana.







