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## The Current Landscape of American Religion: Diversity, Individuation, and the Implications for an Aging Population

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*The Current Landscape of American Religion: Diversity, Individuation, and the Implications for an Aging Population.*

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*Introduction*

Religion is a vast and vibrant part of American society, continually evolving as the American people change. This makes generalizations somewhat hazardous, as our society continues to expand and diversify, and religion does as well. However, one can identify a few overall trends in the religious field in the United States, some part of deep historical patterns and some more recent. These form the context in which any particular set of developments in religion, spirituality, and aging occur. This chapter will argue that the major development in contemporary American religion is the *intersection of 'diversity' and 'individuation.'* Each of those two processes, and the two together, are producing ever more options for Americans in terms of: a) organizational commitment; and b) religious beliefs and practices. People have more religious options from which to choose, and more autonomy to make such choices in terms of their individual wants, needs, and preferences. And in turn, diversification and individuation are putting ever more pressure on Americans to understand and legitimate their religious involvement along those lines. More options are available, and there is more expectation that people will make choices for themselves.

In terms of religious traditions, there is more diversity within the United States than ever before, with substantial numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and religious 'nones' now a part of the population in addition to ever more variations of Christianity and Judaism. Moreover, within each tradition there are more options based on more cultural varieties of religious practice; so, for example, Orthodox Christians can find Russian, and Greek, and Ukrainian Orthodox communities in many major cities, or there are congregations of Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi Muslims. This expands the opportunities to tailor various aspects of the religious tradition in order to fit commitment and practice to one's individual situation. Thus, there is more religious "hybridity," and more cultural pressures for individuals to fit

traditions to themselves in the quest for religious and personal ‘authenticity.’ For new American immigrants of many religious backgrounds this proliferation of options has often led to clear generational tensions between the first and second/third generations in terms of how they practice their faith.

But even native-born American Christians, who continue to be a majority in the country, are not immune to the processes of diversification and individuation. For example, there are increasingly fewer people in the pews of religious congregations, as even those who continue to identify with a denomination or tradition seem increasingly likely to believe that organizational involvement is relatively optional (Chaves, 2017, 48-55). Moreover, less authority is being granted to denominational authority structures and religious traditions by people who are in the pews (Chaves, 2017, 59-61). Increasing numbers of people consider themselves "spiritual but not religious" – while the numbers of such folks may be small overall, they are increasing and they come from demographics that once were the bulwark support populations for traditional congregations (Chaves, 2017, 8). Finally, there are millions of regular congregational members who carefully sift their faith's religious teachings, incorporating some into their own belief system, but paying little attention to others. All this is challenging the ways in which religious organizations work, and what it means to call oneself “religious.”

Finally, in considering these trends and their effects on religion, spirituality, and aging, an important contextual factor is that American society is experiencing increasing generational segregation (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005; Uhlenberg & De Jong Gierveld, 2004). For over a century educational institutions have been sorted by age cohorts. Combined with ever-faster trends in pop culture, from music to slang, the age-range of peer cohorts narrows. Also, family structures are decreasingly multi-generational, and even residential neighborhoods are not immune to this process. While there may be a recent surge in post-college twenty-somethings returning to their parents’ homes for a few years, family groupings are nonetheless smaller than they once were. This is especially true as people age, as older Americans are increasingly likely to be living with age and generational peers rather than with extended multi-generational kin. Research has shown that age segregation has both belief and practice implications

for young adult religiosity; this chapter will help set the stage for the essays in this volume that consider whether this is also true for those who are aging.

In sum, this chapter discusses the religious and cultural context for studying religion, aging, and spirituality by considering the dynamics of diversity, individuation, and their interaction in the religious landscape, reviewing recent sociological data to make the case.

### *Diversity*

The increasing diversity in American religion is unmistakable. One consistent source of religious diversity is the increasing numbers of immigrants to the United States in the last 30-40 years, and the different religions represented in those groups of newcomers. As a number of scholars have documented (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut, 2014; Prothero, 2006; Warner & Wittner, 1998; Wuthnow, 2005) the changes in immigration policy in 1965 altered both the number of immigrants arriving legally and the regions from which those migrants originate. After a half-century of discouraging immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, Africa, and even longer from Asia, the 1965 Hart-Cellers Act opened up those regions to legal immigration. And while the law placed some restrictions on Latin America that had not been there previously (see Zolberg, 2008), other aspects of the new policies, and the economic situation facing many Latin American countries, encouraged renewed immigration from Western Hemispheric nations.

The result, since the 1970s, has been immigrant numbers from Asian nations unlike anything previously in American history. The increases have been notable for Chinese and Korean immigrants, people from Vietnam and Thailand, and South Asian immigrants from India and Pakistan. Not surprisingly, this has produced numbers of Muslim, Hindus, and Buddhists in the United States unlike ever before. Current estimates are that there are about 3.3 million Muslims (c. 1% of the population), 3.8 million Buddhists (about 1.2%), and about 2.2 million Hindus (about .8%) in the U.S. (see Mohamed, 2016; see also, PewForum.org, 2014). Further, events in Eastern Europe that occurred shortly after the changes in immigration policy restrictions led to some increased numbers of Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants. The Jewish community remains about 2% of the national population.

These numbers are difficult to state with precision, as the U.S. census does not ask about religion, and the reports of numbers by religious groups themselves are notoriously unreliable, and also vary by the definition of religious “member.” Some religious traditions include children, others do not. Some are more likely than others to include significant numbers of people who are nominally, or “culturally” Jewish or Hindu or whatever without being particularly religiously observant. Further, not all the non-Christian diversity comes through immigration, as about 20-25% of American Muslims are African American, and Buddhism includes large number of American (usually white) converts.

This diversity is actually experienced differentially. It is more likely in urban places than rural or small towns, more likely on either coast than in the Mountain West or the South. Thus, for those native-born Christians who live around groups of Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists, their overall small numbers in the population will probably seem surprising. And indeed the numbers are growing. But it will be a while until the numbers get large enough to be caught in random national surveys without specific targeting or weighting of the samples. At present, non-Christian religious diversity is growing, and culturally significant, but still numerically fairly small.

The first generation of these post-1965 non-Christian immigrant groups is aging, while many of the second generation are now starting their own families and producing a third generation. Soon, American Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists will begin to face issues that American Christians and Jews have for some time – how to understand and accommodate the ways in which religious practice changes with age, retirement, and eventual infirmity.

While the changes in American religious demographics since the 1970s are in many ways dramatic, it is important to recognize that religious diversity is in fact an old story in national life. The key is to recognize what gets considered “diversity” in any given historical period. It is true that many of the earliest groups of English and Western European settlers to the New World were fairly homogenous ethno-religious groups – and often determined to keep their new colonies that way. Thus, Puritan Massachusetts persecuted religious dissenters and there were debates as to whether African slaves or Native Americans were even candidates for religious conversion (e.g., whether they actually had “souls”

to save). But in a thinly settled land, with ever increasing numbers of new arrivals from Europe, enforcing such uniformity proved difficult. The first challenges to religious unity in Massachusetts were Baptists and Quakers in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Demerath & Williams, 1992), but religious minorities and the non-religious either migrated to more tolerant Rhode Island or Pennsylvania, or to the ‘frontier’ of western Massachusetts, then New York.

The Scot-Irish groups that immigrated through the Carolinas and other mid-Atlantic regions in the early national period brought yet another type of Protestantism (Fischer, 1989; Hatch, 1989) to the country – one increasingly focused on personal experience and individual commitment rather than covenanted communities and doctrinal traditions. Communalist groups such as German Moravians moved into frontier areas (and later, Mennonites and Amish) so that they could preserve their distinctive religious cultures. Similarly, homegrown religious diversity began to flourish, as Mormons began in the “burn over” district of Western New York, and Disciples of Christ emerged out of Appalachia (see Moore, 1986). Thus, while in 1790 the first census showed only about 1% of the nation to be non-Protestant, what the Protestants were varied significantly from Congregational New England, through the multi-denominational Middle Atlantic, to the Anglican South and all along the frontier (see also, Finke & Stark, 1992).

Finally, religious diversity has increased due to schisms among established Protestant groups. Whether over doctrinal matters, or organizational policies, or particular religious practices, Protestantism was born in schism and has continued to fragment, or diversify depending upon one’s view, ever since. For example, in the United States the question of slavery ruptured every major Protestant denomination between 1840 and 1865, some of which have never re-merged. But issues such as the proper interpretation of the Bible, or the appropriate age for baptism, divided groups even absent national political issues. Due to definitional and counting issues, there is little agreement even on the basic number of Protestant denominations currently in the U.S. The Pew Research Center, based on its 2004 survey, notes that American Protestantism encompasses “more than a dozen major denominational families – such as Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and Pentecostals . . . [t]hese denominational families, in turn, are

made up of a host of different denominations” (PewForum.org, 2005). And this assessment of Protestant diversity does not count what have been called “new religious movements” that have emerged out of many different established religious traditions (such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Hare Krishnas, the Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the Church of Scientology, just to name a few; see Melton, 2002; Lewis, 2003). In sum, the combination of immigration, schism, hybridity, and religious innovation means that the contemporary United States has an astounding diversity of religious options available.

### *Individuation*

American culture and society are regularly analyzed for their high levels of “individualism” (see, for example, Gans, 1991; Lasch, 1979). Indeed, that it is a cherished cultural value is central to my argument here. But importantly, individualism as a cultural value and presumption is reinforced and structured by the legal system and the polity. The notion that rights – political, social, economic – append to individuals is central to U.S. law in almost every respect. It is as individuals, rather than as members of a social or cultural group that we stand before the law. Even laws meant to redress centuries-old problems of discrimination and inequality, such as affirmative action policies, must be structured so that such redress does not impermissibly violate the rights of any individual regardless of group status. The result of these structural arrangements, combined with cultural valorization, is a process of *individuation* that reaches both institutionally and in individuals’ lives.

Cultural individualism has often come into conflict with the orientations of many religious groups (see Williams, 2007). Many groups of believers see themselves first as a community, a group that stands in particular relation to the divine – this is particularly true among religious minorities, or among ethno-racial minorities. Thus, there is a tension in law and politics as related to religion; at what point can and should the state intervene on behalf of an individual, using an individualist conception of human or legal rights, when that individual is embedded in a community that judges certain actions as normative or religiously mandated? Balancing individual rights and the freedom of religion for religious groups,

particularly minority religious groups, is the source of contention in many court cases (see Williams 1995). In general, the courts have sought to protect children (thus, for example, Christian Scientist adults may forego standard medical care, but must provide it for their children) and protect others from physical abuse. But freedom of religion as a property of the community versus an inalienable right of the individual continues to trouble the American legal system.

The tension is embedded historically. The Puritan legacy is to understand the righteous society as a “community of saints” but it was a community of individually-called saints, a “chosen people” of voluntary participants. And yet, the moral regulation of the community at the local level was severe (Shain, 1994). This mirrors a constant predicament facing religious groups – when the criterion for membership in the chosen community relies on an act of individualized piety, such as being “born again” or experiencing the personal reality of “being on fire for the Lord,” how to accommodate the second and then the third generation? Of course, serious attempts are made to keep youth in the fold through education and socialization, but the results are not always what the parents would hope for. Are children then to be excluded? Over history, many religious groups developed compromise solutions, such as Puritan New England’s “Half-way Covenant” (Hall, 2008) or the “Birthright” Quaker status prior to complete “convincement” (Levy, 1988).

As noted above, however, the tightly ordered religious communities of the early European settlers proved difficult to maintain in the U.S. whatever the efforts to do so. The frontier offered a space where institutional control was more difficult, and communal gatherings less frequent and more voluntary. The influx of new pietist Protestant groups and the fervor of the Second Great Awakening made individualized expressions of faith more normative. Some groups, such as the Amish or Moravians, and of course, the Mormons, managed to maintain themselves as tightly knit ethno-religious communities – there was social and geographical room to do that. But the impulse toward individualism in belief and practices became a deeply set cultural trend, facilitated by social, geographic, and legal features of the growing nation.



The embeddedness of individualism in American culture can be seen in some of the political and social trends of the late-19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century, even when some of those trends were in putative opposition to each other. The period 1880 to 1920 (generally) spanned two eras that historians generally refer to as the “Gilded Age” (see Cashman, 1993) and the “Progressive Era” (see Pastorello, 2014). The former is noted as a period of rapidly increasing wealth and inequality (with the beginnings of an ideology of “Social Darwinism” to justify it), while the latter is notable for its attempts at increasing direct democracy (for example, through adding the “initiative” and “referendum” to many state constitutions, amending the Constitution to provide for the direct election of U.S. Senators, and attacks on urban political machines). The entire time period was one of rapid urbanization and industrialization, and not surprisingly, was also marked by movements resisting these trends (such as the Populism of the South and Midwest, often represented by William Jennings Bryan; see Kazin, 1998). And throughout the era immigrant numbers were high, particularly from Eastern and Southern Europe, and particularly people who were Catholic or Jewish. And again, not surprisingly, there was significant nativist backlash against such immigration, much of it couched in religious terms (Williams 2016).

What is significant about this period for the purposes of this essay was the assumptions about the value of individualism – often promoted by both sides of the political and social cleavages. The Protestant concern with Catholic immigrants often involved the latter’s alleged failure to respect the individual, subordinating him or her to rigid church doctrine that discouraged independent thought and the free-will conversion experience Protestants thought essential for salvation. On the other hand, many Progressives were concerned about the capacities for poor Catholic and Jewish immigrants to succeed in American society and responded with outreach programs that encouraged “Americanization” – aspects of which included learning and speaking English, abandoning “old world” customs, and embracing Anglo-Saxon values (e.g., Pastorello, 2014, 22-23, 173). In all of this, the centrality of the individual to the American, and Protestant, worldview became even more salient as a crucial distinction between what made the United State “exceptional” compared to the “old” world. Thus was individuation furthered.

While it might give an historian heart palpitations to jump so quickly from the early national period, to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the 1960s, I do so here to illustrate both the continuity of individualism as a tendency in American religion, and to point to particular periods of accelerated social change. Thus, the explosion of cultural individualism in the era colloquially known as ‘the sixties’ was not a revolution in the sense of introducing a completely new cultural landscape and meaning system to society, such as replacing the Orthodox Czarist regime with atheistic state socialism in 1917. Rather, the sixties in the U.S. took themes embedded deeply in American market capitalist ideology and applied them to middle-class social mores, promising a similar type of personal liberty, defined as freedom from external institutional constraint. The notion of “do your own thing” – and the presumption that such a dictum could and should be available to all with little worry about the health of the collective – was nicely aligned with Adam Smith’s contention that the pursuit of private interests would result in a public good. Like market capitalism, the cultural system assumed that moral individuals would engage in moral actions, with less theoretical attention to how such moral individuals were to be created.

I am not voicing a cultural conservative dismissal of ‘60s politics. Groups of Americans who had been systematically excluded from full participation as citizens in socio-political life – from African Americans to women to Latinx workers to gay and lesbian persons – challenged the institutional and cultural arrangements of their oppression. But one of the ways this manifested in longer term cultural change was emphasizing individual “rights” (Glendon, 1991; Skrentny, 2002), and, importantly, magnifying a deep distrust of established institutions and the “elites” who ran them. Political scientists Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider identified this as “the confidence gap” (1983) and showed that the suspicion of elites had spread from government (where anti-war sentiment regarding Viet Nam amplified an existing wariness of “politicians”) to institutions such as business and labor, creating a changed cultural climate. Mark Chaves (2017, 82-87) brings this up-to-date in terms of the leadership of established religious institutions. Starting in the 1970s, but accelerated rapidly by the televangelist scandals of the late 1990s and the Catholic clerical abuse publicity of the early 2000s, trust in religious leaders had diminished considerably.

Declining trust in institutions, including religious institutions, is manifested in less direct ways as well. One significant trend, I argue, is the rise of people describing themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). While the size and significance of this trend is a matter of some scholarly debate, the phrase itself is taken to mean that people are affirming a personal, individualized sense of the spiritual, of something beyond the material world, or even a type of personal relationship with some aspect of the transcendent or divine. But they are denying that they find this in “religion” – presumably organized religion and its institutionalized doctrines. An early example of this orientation in the sociology of religion literature is in Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton’s *Habits of the Heart* (1985), in which one respondent distances herself from any religious tradition, but indicates she has a faith grounded in her own inner voice that both focuses on taking care of herself as well as guides her actions towards others; she calls it “Sheilaism” (1985,221). Bellah and his colleagues point to this as a self-centered “expressive individualism” run amok, cutting people off from “communities of memory” and meaningful social relationships. They also note, with displeasure, that in a 1978 Gallup poll 80% of respondents thought it both possible and positive to develop one’s moral sensibility and beliefs about life without the guidance of a religious institution (Bellah, et al., 1985, 228). Bellah, et al. note quite rightly that one main purpose of these very organizations is to help shape individuals’ moral lives and frameworks, but various strains of cultural individualism have convinced many Americans not only that they don’t need such institutionalized guidance, but that it is somehow better, more virtuous, and more authentic to come to such understandings without the help of institutional authorities.

While Bellah, et al. did not use the phrase SBNR, other scholars have, and have often either implied or disputed its importance or magnitude. For example, Smith & Denton (2005) find little evidence of “spiritual but not religious” in their study of youth religiosity. Many of their respondents saw spirituality and religion as linked, and the idea of separating the two did not really resonate with them (e.g., 2005, 27). However, while small numbers reported that SBNR was “very true” for them (8%), a significant number called it “somewhat true” (46%). And of the teens that described themselves as “non-religious” 13% said “very true” and 49% said “somewhat true” (2005, 77-78). Interestingly, what the

authors did find wide-spread was an outlook and orientation they labelled “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD). This was a generalized orientation to being a good person and treating others well, and included the assumption that connection to a deistic transcendent power was important for its therapeutic support to them – such as comforting and sustaining them in hard times (2005, 163-164). Smith & Denton despair over how widespread this orientation is; they would prefer that youth hold a theologically developed and clearly thought out set of religious beliefs, and are critical of religious institutions for not countering moralistic therapeutic deism, and its implied pop culture, self-help attributes, with more articulated and considered theological beliefs. That the MTD orientation might align with a formulation of “spiritual but not religious” in terms of emphasizing self-oriented needs and fulfillment is not considered in their dismissal of SBNR, nor do they engage interviewees’ expressions of similar sentiments, even when the SBNR phrase itself is absent (e.g., 2005, 14, 80-81).

Other scholars, without employing the scolding tone used by Smith & Denton, also take issue with the SBNR formulation. Nancy Ammerman (2013) examines constructions of spirituality found in in-depth interviews with American adults. She found four “cultural packages” of meanings that conceptualize spirituality in different ways, with some fuzzy boundaries and overlapping among them. Many respondents understood spirituality as deeply connected to religion, and again, few used the phrase “spiritual but not religious,” leading her to conclude that SBNR is more of a moral and political category than an empirical one. Nonetheless, a not-insignificant number of her respondents disconnected their spirituality from institutional authority. In a similar formulation, Warner (2014) wrote “in defense of religion” as a conceptual category and notes religion’s analytic distinction from spirituality (religion being connected to community while spirituality connects individuals to sources of ultimate meaning); Warner argues sensibly that the two concepts need not be antithetical, nor can religion be totally absorbed by spirituality.

Scholarly doubts notwithstanding, Mark Chaves (2017) found the number of Americans willing to understand their own spirituality in ways aligned to SBNR to be increasing. His findings are drawn from GSS survey data, and involve responses to two different questions, asking whether the respondent

considered themselves a religious person and whether they considered themselves a spiritual person. He found that the number of people answered “not” or “slightly” to the first question was growing, but a portion of these same people did not answer that way to the question about whether they were spiritual – thus they were disclaiming a religious identity while claim some spiritual connection. Chaves found the number of people with this array of answers to have risen from 9% in 1998 to 14% in 2006-08 to 16% in 2010-14. He notes that people are both less likely to call themselves “religious,” but more likely to think of themselves as “spiritual” (2017, p.38). These finds are echoed, using analysis of the same pair of questions that Chaves examined, but with higher numbers and a more dramatic increase, in a recent Pew Research Center report. That report shows 19% fitting the SBNR category in 2012 and 27% doing so in 2017 (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017).

These findings dovetail with the well-known trend in both GSS and Pew survey data that shows a significant increase in those people identifying as religious “nones” but without a concomitant rise in the number who are atheists; that is, many who answer “none” for affiliation still profess beliefs in God or a Higher Power, often believe in life after death, and engage in private religious practices such as prayer (see Baker & Smith, 2009; Chaves, 2017). In sum, SBNR may be oversold in popular culture – and may be most apparent among well-educated middle-class whites who tend to score highly on many measures of individualism (though not solely there) – but it represents a real trend in the individuation of American belief and more evidence of general suspicion of institutional authority.

Other scholars writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s emphasized individualism in American religious practice. Philip Hammond (1992) called it the “third disestablishment” – the first was the legal separation of church and state in the Constitution, the second was the displacing of the Protestant cultural establishment after World War II, and the third was the abandoning of religious institutional authority after the 1960s. Religion became increasingly susceptible to the drive for “personal autonomy,” at the cost of institutional authority and with increasing cultural hybridity.

Wade Clark Roof (1993; 1999) wrote similarly, but pegged these changes particularly to the rise and maturing of the “baby boom” generation. They became a “generation of seekers” who foregrounded

personal fulfillment, reserved for themselves the right to adjudicate the appropriateness of religio-moral teachings offered by religious authorities, and had an in-and-out relationship to organizational belonging. Boomers feel free to move on, seeking the religious style and community that they felt (and feel) best fit their needs. At about this same time, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, became associated with the phrase “cafeteria Catholic” as a disparaging way to characterize those members of the faith who felt entitled to pick-and-choose among church teachings. D’Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Meyer (2001) did not use that normative language, but clearly found evidence for an increased sense of choice, particularly among younger generations of Catholics, as did Patrick McNamara (1992), who characterized young Catholics as following “conscience first, tradition second.”

Extracting personal religious identity and sacred meaning-systems from institutional participation and authority can be found in other, more recent, research as well. Jerome Baggett (2009) did interviews and a survey with parishioners from six Roman Catholic parishes in Northern California – generally the East Bay area. His survey found that solid majorities thought it possible to be a “good Catholic” without going to church every Sunday (61%), without their marriage being approved by the Church (61%), without obeying the teachings on divorce and remarriage (60%), and without believing in the infallibility of the pope (59%) (2009, p. 29). Baggett notes that these percentages are lower than some other national survey, but that they are significant because he was surveying people who were active in a parish. Further, only 38% of his respondents claimed that the “teaching authority” of the Vatican was “very important” to them, while 89% said that “spirituality and personal growth” was very important (2009, p. 68). Clearly, even many active church-goers were finding meaning distinct from institutional authority, or at least claimed to.

On occasion, I refer to Hammond, Roof, and colleagues as the “California School” in the sociology of religion – referring both to their institutional affiliations and the sites of much of their research. Their work may reflect the perhaps accentuated individualism of the Left Coast. However, historian Doug Rossinow (1998) reveals some similar dynamics in the “politics of authenticity” in 1960s “new left” in Texas. Rossinow demonstrated that liberal Christians developed a keen sense of “moral

individualism” as a way of resisting the conformist conservative evangelical Protestantism on issues such as racial segregation, the Viet Nam War, and the women’s movement. While many of these people worked to try to manage an individualism that was balanced with commitment to community (especially across racial lines) the touchstone of “authenticity” remained the individual conscience. The notion that religious authenticity emerges from individual reflection and choice remains a hallmark in many young people’s thinking, especially white young adults (e.g., Williams, Irby, & Warner, 2016).

While the individuation of religious belief and commitment is a wide and deep cultural trend in American society and religion, it does not affect all racial, ethnic, or religious groups equally. It is more common among white, college-educated, middle-class people (where Gans, 1991 located “middle American individualism”). It is less common among religious groups who are religious and/or racial minorities in the U.S. (e.g., Williams, et al., 2016), in part because community cohesion is a good way to manage some of the precarity of societal life in those situations. Nonetheless, there is evidence (e.g., Min, 2010; Williams, 2011; Williams & Vashi, 2007) of second-generation members of immigrant families using the language of “choice” and individual decision-making when discussing their own religious commitments – community often matters deeply to them, but they negotiate that commitment within a framework that clearly values the individual conscience and volitional decision-making as integral to the authenticity of their religious identities.

### *Diversity and individuation intersect*

Diversity need not be accompanied by individualism – multicultural pluralism can exist at the community level, and religion can remain a more or less ascribed characteristic even as the sheer varieties of religion within a society increase. And, as noted, many groups of religious and/or ethno-racial minorities do not put as high a value on individualism and individual autonomy as do many native-born, white Americans. But a valuing of diversity, culturally as well as in legal frameworks, along with individualism together pose a significant challenge that can result in the fracturing of traditional and

corporatist forms of community. It can also lead to synthetic religious creations and a cultural hybridity that many would describe as creative and positive innovations.

However, there is no question that the two processes, in the context of declining confidence in institutional leaders, a generalized distrust of “elites,” and work and family lives that are ever more speeded up and mobile, have resulted in declining connection to the most common form of American religious expression – the congregation. Robert Putnam (2000), among others, pointed to declining participation in voluntary associations – including religious congregations – as damaging to American civil society. Chaves (2017) has assembled forty years of GSS data and three waves of the National Congregational Survey (NCS) and finds clear trends: fewer Americans belong to religious congregations, fewer Americans look to congregations as sites of religious and life authority, fewer Americans attend worship services regularly, and those that do are increasingly older. The patterns are distinct enough that he terms in a “decline” in the forms of “traditional” religiosity. The religious congregation is far from dead – or even dying – as it remains the most common form of voluntary association in the U.S. and is consistently shown to have positive effects on many aspects of life for participants. But participants are more irregular, more selective, and less fully committed over the life course than they once were.

Americans have more religious choices than ever. There are more different religions, and more congregations/temples/practitioners of each of the major world religions, than there ever were. It is increasingly acceptable to adopt and adapt practices from one tradition, even while not fully embracing that faith or abandoning one’s received identity – the trajectory of Buddhism’s “mindfulness” in American culture is evidence for that (Wilson, 2013), or the popular recognition of the concept of “JUBU” – Jewish *and* Buddhist (Kamenetz, 1994). Religious culture, in many ways, has been increasingly commodified, especially in popular culture industries, giving believers the opportunity to “consume” religion even more selectively. And the proliferation of media platforms, from talk radio to televangelism to web-based worship (Cowan, 2005) has also increased the numbers of ways in which religion can be experienced privately or selectively.



In the debates over “secularization” that have characterized sociology of religion for some time, too much of the debate had an ‘is not, is too’ quality – that is, that religion was either declining and fading away, or was vibrant and dynamic. The possibility that both could be true, at least in part depending upon the changing forms and expressions of religious life, was too often ignored. That may well be the lesson here – the intersection of diversity and individuation, coupled with a clear decline in institutionalized religious authority, means that many Americans insist on carving out their own forms of spiritual and religious expression, and have many more forms and resources available with which to do so. The locus of religious authority has shifted to the individual, and experimentation and personalization are legitimate outcomes. Declaring oneself an atheist still arouses suspicion among many Americans (e.g., Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Edgell, Hartmann, Stewart & Gerteis, 2016), but being a religious “none,” calling oneself “spiritual but not religious,” or maintaining a ‘cultural’ connection to one’s faith tradition, rather than an observant one, are increasingly common and acceptable.

*What this may mean for religion, spirituality, and aging*

The basic claim of this essay is clear – the increasing diversity of religious options in the U.S. combines with a deeply embedded cultural valuing of individual decision-making and self-fulfillment to produce a religious landscape that is ever more varied, and one in which people are able, and often expected, to tailor their belief and practice commitments to their own needs. Institutionalized religious authority has less sway than organizational images of hierarchy would imply and the legitimacy and acceptance of being without a faith, or without a religious community, is increasing. What do these institutional and cultural trends mean for religion, spirituality, and aging? This entire volume offers a set of well-researched answers to this question; I close here by only suggesting some things worth observing, in terms of belief systems, religious practices, and religious organizations and communities.

Regarding religious beliefs, it seems fairly safe to expect ever greater diversity and cultural hybridities, and having them legitimated by individual experience and needs. Combinations of traditions, such as JUBUs, or charismatic Catholics, should increase. Even one consistent negative reaction to

cultural blending – that of renewed orthodoxy or fundamentalism – will be filtered through the worldviews and practices of a culture that is already non-traditional. There is substantial evidence that a satisfying spiritual life is helpful in promoting good health among the aging – the capacity to make that spiritual life personalized and individually salient would seem to have never been greater. Some scholars note that such religious innovations as “spiritual but not religious” are particularly acute among the Baby Boom generation – that is, the effects of the 1960s cultural trends are more salient for them than other generations. Since this is the current generation that is retiring and moving into old age, the availability of options and the valuing of individuation seems made for them.

However, another important dimension of the beneficial aspects of religion (on physical and mental health, life satisfaction, etc.) is the involvement in a community – basically, a congregation. Congregations can offer social and emotional support, networks that are both instrumentally useful (say, for example, for a ride to a doctor’s appointment) and expressive, and a doctrine and values that emphasizes self-care and health. These are of great assistance to health and help people resist anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Thus, the decline in congregation involvement and attendance may be social factors that undercut the potential positive benefits of an agreeable spiritual life. There are a number of reasons that older people may not be particularly active in a religious congregation – whether they were raised in a non-religious household, or have health issues, or have competing life demands, or have relocated upon retirement and have difficulty connecting with a new community. But the general decline in congregational involvement may well have a potentially negative effect on the health and general well-being of the aging, and on congregations themselves.

Religious congregations in the U.S. overwhelmingly run on volunteer labor. As such, it is not surprising that American religious congregations flourished post-World War II – the widespread development of the suburban, one-income, nuclear family was an excellent source of that kind of effort. Volunteer labor from “stay-at-home” mothers became the backbone of much church programming (Edgell, 2005). Further, this arrangement also facilitated a clear shift in programming interest to children and young adults – thus, the “young family” became the symbol of a thriving congregation.

But the shifts in family structures, such as more women in full-time work force, or more single parenting, has left many congregations struggling to keep up. Focusing on young families has sometimes meant that senior congregational members are relatively neglected, and differentiated programming can increase the age-segregation already in society. At least at this point, it seems clear that the large numbers of retiring Baby Boomers are not going to be a surge in volunteering for local religious congregations (Seaman, 2012). As noted, Boomers are less organizational in their religious commitments and less religious overall, and may have gotten used to the relative professionalization of congregational services that marked the flush periods of the late 1950s and 1960s. On the other hand, there is evidence that Boomers are more likely to volunteer generally than the generations before them (Einolf, 2009), so it may well continue into retirement – but that may not be in religious congregations specifically.

While all these trends portend potential challenges for religious congregations and their leadership as people approach retirement and old age, doomsday scenarios may be unwarranted. Robert Wuthnow (2002) engaged the literature on the organizational crisis in American civil society – represented by Putnam’s (2000) analysis – and offered a slightly different take. Rather than a “decline” he saw a shift in the forms of association. That is, it may be true that older organizational forms were experiencing some decline, and this would include the religious congregation, but it was not true that associations were dead. New types of connections, more fluid, more episodic in life, were vibrant and growing. He called them “loose connections” but still acknowledged their importance.

In this way, religious organizational life may be transforming a bit like religious belief is. There is a decline in traditional beliefs, and in many traditional ways of belonging. But belief and belonging are not dead, they are being transformed into different forms and with changing dynamics. As American society moves into a period of a large generation retiring, and people living longer, the ways in which diversity and individuation affect spirituality and religion will no doubt change as well.

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