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“Friend of God”: Megachurches and the New Frontiers of the American Exurb

Commentators often describe presidential debates as “political rituals” of American democracy.¹ So it should come as no surprise that during the last presidential campaign in the U.S. the first public debate between John McCain and Barack Obama took on a kind of solemnity quite unusual for American politics. When they first appeared together in public on August 16, 2008, McCain and Obama were a few days away from receiving their parties’ official nominations to the final presidential race. And although technically this was not yet a “presidential debate,” the staging went to great lengths to make it look like one: interviewed separately, the candidates were asked the same questions in the same sequence, and in between the interviews no chance was missed for public handshakes and a photo-op.

What made this first debate unique for American politics was that it was held at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, an upscale community in Northern Orange County, one of the hubs of Southern-California’s sprawling metropolitan region. In a country whose first constitutional amendment creates, in Thomas Jefferson’s

ABSTRACT. In the new century, Megachurches are growing exponentially on the American suburban landscape and now account over ten percent of all churchgoers in the U.S. A phenomenon closely connected with the regionalization of American cities, Megachurches are in many ways a reflections of both America’s changing cultural climate as well as its urban landscape. With urban growth areas penetrating in what once used to be the nation’s rural heartland, American churches have recently tended to grow in size and lean towards evangelicalism and fundamentalism. In this article, case studies involving three Megachurches (Crystal Cathedral, Saddleback Church, and Radiant Church) try to explain why these “very large churches” respond to major transformations in the American physical landscape in the last half century, where middle class fantasies of individual prosperity meet an unrelenting redefinition of organized religion in North America.

words, a “wall of separation” between church and state, that church-held presidential debate signals how crucial religion has become in the North-American continent. Even more crucial appears the kind of church where the event was staged: Saddleback Church is not a church like all others. Or better, it is a church like many more churches in the United States today: a recently established Christian congregation (Saddleback was founded in 1980), strategically located in a growing metropolitan suburb, and numbering tens of thousands of worshippers (it is estimated that on any given Sunday approximately 22,000 people attend the many functions held at Saddleback) gathering around their pastor-entrepreneur and founder, Rick Warren, a man privy to influential politicians who was named by *TIME Magazine* in 2005 one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World” and who has authored many books, among which the best-selling *The Purpose Driven Church*, a “war manual” of America’s new “seeker” churches. (Needless to say, during that first presidential debate, Warren acted as moderator-interviewer.)

Most importantly, Saddleback does not belong to any of the mainline Protestant denominations in America. It is not Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, nor Anglican/Episcopalian: rather, it is a member of the SBC (Southern Baptist Convention), a mostly-conservative evangelical denomination emphasizing charismatic leadership and local church independence.² Saddleback receives neither financial support by nor interference from a higher, external authority. Nor does it feature any of the typical symbols of Christian worship: at Saddleback, the cross is hardly noticeable among the several giant screens that make it look more like a rock concert venue than a sanctuary of worship. In its air-conditioned, high-tech main church-auditorium, the faithful sit in comfortable padded chairs rather than in pews, the atmosphere is informal, and the in-house Christian-rock band is an essential element of the service. The auditorium is the centerpiece of a much larger “campus” which offers worshippers the full scale services of a commercial hub – urban decor, coffee shops and bookstores, among other things, all making the place resemble what anthropologist Marc Augé calls “non-places,” sites of exurban transit such as airports, shopping-malls, and amusement parks. Saddleback,

in short, is one of the many new churches of the American West. Saddleback is a Megachurch.

What is a Megachurch?

Scholars of American religion define a Megachurch as a congregation with an average Sunday attendance of 2,000 faithful or more. For a country where religious practice has historically taken place mostly within small or very small communities (even today, 71% of America's 335,000 churches have fewer than 100 members) (Thumma 2007, 45), churches with weekly attendance in the order of the thousands are clearly exceptions. Or so it may seem.

In a research conducted in 2005 by, among others, the Hartford Institute for Religious Research and now the basis of the standard textbook on Megachurches, *Beyond Megachurch Myths* by Scott Thumma and Dave Travis (2007), only 10% of American churches (i.e. 33,000 congregations) have more than 350 members.³ However, and this is crucial, these 10% larger churches account for approximately 40% of all churchgoers in the United States. And if we focus even closer on the larger among these "large churches," the data is even more revealing: today's 1,260 Megachurches in the United States⁴ are perceived as "home church" by around 12 million faithful, which means 10% of all participating church members in the United States.⁵ And this does not account for televangelism and the newly sprouting internet ministries, whose pool of virtual worshipers is hard to pin down, but nonetheless staggering: Houston's Lakewood Church alone broadcasts its Sunday service to over 7 million viewers in the United States and to more than 100 countries in the world (Pitts 2008).

Megachurches across America have enjoyed a sudden and exponential growth in recent years: in 1960 there were only 19 churches in the US which qualified as Megachurches; 20 years later, in 1980, their number had grown tenfold, a figure which then quadrupled in the next 20 years (there were 600 Megachurches in the year 2000). The number then doubled again within only five years. And if the trend appears

to be continuing (Thumma estimates that the current growth is “at least 50 churches” per year) (Thumma 2007, 6), the current situation is already worth special attention: 10% of all Americans churchgoers today attend the larger churches, which are only a third of a percent of all US churches.

While these “super-churches” have an average attendance of approximately 3,600 people per week, the 50 largest of them have more than 10,000 (Thumma 2007, 45). The largest of all, the already mentioned Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, has a weekly attendance of 47,000. And, according to the Hartford Institute, of the five largest Megachurches in the United States, 4 are located in the American West: Lakewood Church (47,000), and Second Baptist Church (23,000) in Houston, TX; Saddleback Church in Orange County, CA (22,000); and Life Church in Edmond, OK (19,000).⁶ Not one of the top 20 US Megachurches belongs to any of the mainline Christian denominations.

Religion in America

Religion in America deserves very close attention. According to various scholars, in this first decade of the twenty-first century “the United States is [...] among the most religious of modern Western nations” (Ammerman 2005, 1; Chaves 2004, 35): 85 percent of Americans call themselves Christian (compared, for example, to 77 per cent of Israelis calling themselves Jewish) (McKibben, 2005); two Americans in three affirm they are members of a church or a synagogue (Chaves 2004, 30); and a 2007 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (an independent organization) found that almost 8.5 in 10 Americans claimed that religion is “important” or “very important” in their lives (compared, for example, to less than 3 Italians in 10, as polled in the same survey, claiming that religion is “very important” to them).⁷

As scholars report that the importance of religion for Americans has increased over the last 40 years, religion has also taken a conser-

vative turn during that same period, notably as a consequence of the rapid growth of Fundamentalism and, more recently, Evangelicalism. Although terminologically generic, both Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism refer to forms of Christian faith outside the control of the mainline reformed denominations and emphasizing personal conversion (i.e. the idea of being “born again”), “literal biblicism” (i.e. the belief that Biblical narratives are to be understood literally), “millenarianism” (the belief in an imminent return of Jesus Christ) and the centrality of spreading the Christian word and gaining new converts. If H. L. Mencken, writing in 1925, could simply dismiss the Christian Right as a carnival of anti-modern backward buffoons (Sharlet 2006), the contemporary Evangelicals’ influential positions on politically hot topics such as opposition to same-sex marriage, abortion, and stem cell research,⁸ as well as their decisive weight in recent political contests in supporting candidates who pledged to uphold their values, has turned this group into what a recent *Harper’s Magazine* article calls the “biggest political and cultural movement of our times,” with an explicit agenda aimed at questioning America’s “wall of separation” between church and state (Sharlet 2006).

If as late as the 1960s the US Supreme Court had issued important decisions firmly upholding such separation,⁹ by the time Ronald Reagan ran for president in 1980 that wind of political secularism had changed, and the role of Evangelicals in public life began to increase: Rob Grant, Jerry Falwell, and other well-known Fundamentalist clergy were urging Christians to become involved in politics, and supported active engagement through wide-ranging Christian Right movements such as Grant’s American Christian Cause (1974) and Falwell’s Moral Majority (which was particularly popular in the 1980s). And by the late 1990s, Evangelicals were influencing elections and policy-making with groups like the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council, helping the Republican Party to gain control of the White House, both houses of Congress, and influencing the shaping of a more conservative Supreme Court by the mid-1990s.¹⁰ And as George W. Bush, during his first presidential election campaign, declared Jesus Christ his “favorite philosopher,” under his administration politicians of all parties on Capitol Hill attended prayer breakfasts and Bible classes.

Also outside the political realm Evangelicalism seems to have made headway over recent decades: Evangelical businessmen form networks such as the Business Leadership and Spirituality Network, and a growing number of industry bosses try to incorporate Evangelical principles into their businesses, some of them refusing to do business on Sundays, others encouraging their employees to go on missions. Recent films such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* (2004) confirm that evangelicals have penetrated that great bastion of American secularism, Hollywood. And this is happening at a time when another bastion of American secularism, academia, is also being increasingly de-secularized: since Pat Robertson founded Liberty University in Virginia in 1971 – a true war machine of Christian fundamentalism – evangelical colleges have expanded rapidly, increasing enrolment by 60% between 1990 and 2002, a time when the general university population was static. And evangelicalism is a leading force in the Ivy League as well: the *Economist* reports that in a recent year a quarter of Princeton's students were attending Evangelical meetings.¹¹

Religion and Post-Suburbia

Within the scope of this decisive conservative turn, the extraordinary growth of Megachurches in the United States, and especially in the American West, is all the more significant. In this paper I try to argue that: 1. the growth of Megachurches responds to major transformations in the American physical landscape in the last half century; 2. the rising of evangelicalism in the US is in some ways connected with the growth of Megachurches.

Arguably the mother of all Megachurches, the Crystal Cathedral at Garden Grove, CA, began operating as a drive-in worship center on March 27th, 1955, a few months prior to the opening, two blocks away, of that other Megachurch of sorts of Southern California: Disneyland. Not yet housed at that time in the gigantic glass and steel postmodern building that Philip Johnson was to design in the 1970s, the Crystal Cathedral began operating in what had previously been a

drive-in movie theater. The early faithful attended the service – California style – while cozily sitting in their automobiles, as pastor and founder Dr. Robert Schuller preached his own original form of “Christian capitalism” (in fact he claimed to be “the first Christian capitalist”): the promise that God would bestow financial blessings upon those who would not only accept Christ but, especially, give generously to the church (cf. Williams 2006, 106).

A major cultural and architectural landmark of Orange County, and still impacting Christian audiences around the globe with the weekly satellite telecast of its “Hour of Power” service, the Crystal Cathedral today is no longer at the leading edge of Megachurch growth. Struggling somewhat financially and, fifty years after its founding, catering to an ageing congregation, the Crystal Cathedral does not appear on the roster of America’s “100 fastest growing churches” published each year by *Outreach Magazine*. Yet, it serves as a good case study to understand what drew huge crowds to huge churches in the then changing physical landscape of Southern California. The first U.S. region to witness the shift from suburbanization to “post-suburbia” (Kling 1991) and urban regionalization, Southern California evolved around the mid-twentieth century into what became known as the Los Angeles Metropolitan Region, or “sixty-mile post-metropolis” (Abu-Lughod 1999, 258).

According to urban scholars Robert Kling, Spencer Olin and Mark Poster, “post-suburbia” is the urban form typical of the American West today, where space is not only suburban (i.e. decentralized and removed from a still existing urban downtown), but in fact “multi-centered,” i.e. typical of an urban configuration “organized around many distinct, specialized centers” (Kling 1991, 6) and lacking a downtown altogether – i.e. lacking any connection to traditional, recognizable forms of city planning. It is precisely within the context of these new urban spaces, mostly but not exclusively located in the American West, that Megachurches seem to have found their ideal habitat – spaces where, to quote from Kling again, “cities appear to sprawl and merge into one another [...], [l]ong stretches of flat acreage bounded by mountain ranges support a predominantly low-rise landscape that spreads for miles [...], [a]utomobile driving is essential [and] many of the residential and commercial structures are implicitly

designed to emphasize private domesticity and material consumption” (Kling 1991, 6-7).

Originating in the last thirty to forty years and replacing land that had earlier been rural regions, oil fields, prairie or even desert, these new “post-suburbs” have emerged in regions that were hitherto highly unlikely destinations for human settlement: in the deserts of southern Nevada and central Arizona, in the arid, thickly militarized inland portions of Orange County, CA, along Silicon Valley just south of San Francisco, or the Pueblo-Denver corridor in central Colorado. Drawing on vast capacity of cheap energy to fuel massive private-transportation mileages, intensive air conditioning and heating systems needed for settlement in extreme desert and mountain locations that used to be no-man’s land, these post-suburban regions catered to a well defined social group: upper mobile families willing to give up the comforts of city or suburban life in exchange for more living space, affordable mortgages (until the recent mortgage bust, that is), better schools and the comfort of new, convenient mega-malls mushrooming along the major highway intersections. New outposts of the “urban frontier” long after the official closing of the frontier, these “exurbs” emerged with little government oversight and sheer frontier laissez-faire spirit: space was abundant, resources were plentiful, and its fledgling new communities offered new opportunities for unprecedented social experiments.

Radiant Church, Surprise, AZ

Some of the more radical of these experiments involved a new generation of spiritual entrepreneurs who found fertile ground along the sprawl of this end-of-century post-suburbia. To this new breed of modern-day prophets belongs Lee McFarland, who left in 1996 his a high-paying job at Microsoft, sold his house and drove from Redmond, Washington, to Surprise, Arizona. McFarland, who was 36 at the time, had come to Surprise to build a church, though knowing little about leading churches and even less about building them: he had not

attended a seminary, and the whole of his theological training amounted to a yet unfinished correspondence course he was taking to become an evangelical pastor (Mahler 2005). His entrepreneurship combined with the new opportunities the exurb resulted in a potent mix of unforeseeable success.

A few years ago, the *New York Times* took interest in McFarland, whose personal history it saw as exemplary of America's recent religious revival: newly arrived in Surprise, the self-appointed pastor soon discovered that finding believers was by no means simple. While knocking on doors "through identical streets and cul-de-sacs under the hot Arizona sun," he realized that the people were not interested in what he had to offer. So he did what any businessman would have done: he hired a direct-mail company and sent out flyers to everyone living in the new housing tracts in Surprise inviting them to Radiant. The flyers emphasized a new church formula that McFarland was determined on promoting: "You think church is boring and judgmental and that all they want is your money? [...] At Radiant you'll hear a rockin' band and a positive, relevant message. Come as you are. We won't beg for your money. Your kids will love it!" (Mahler, 2005)

Thirteen years later, Radiant Church is on *Outreach Magazine's* roster of the fastest growing churches in America and it has been on that roster for as many years. According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, which runs the most comprehensive existing database of American Megachurches, Radiant is among the four-hundred largest US Megachurches. Its location explains a lot about its phenomenal success. Surprise is a sprawling new suburb of Phoenix, the nation's 99th largest city in 1950, and today the sixth largest and rapidly continuing to grow. Not at all a city in the way Europeans conceive of cities, Phoenix well fits the "regional city" paradigm I was discussing earlier: lacking a center, it is what urban theorist Robert Kling would call a "postsuburban spatial form" which has grown into "a complex and decentralized mixture of urban, suburban, and rural spaces," combining, unlike the traditional suburb, "large poor neighborhoods, including several Mexican barrios, with middle- and upper-class neighborhoods" (Kling 1991, 3).

Located 15 miles north west of downtown Phoenix along route 60, Surprise is one of the last outreaches of Phoenix's growth, further

away from some of the city's better known retirement enclaves – Sun City, Sun City West, and Sun City Grand, all of these middle and upper-middle class gated communities, with golf courses, fitness centers, spas, restaurants and other “good life” amenities. Like many other urban areas in the American South-West, and barring the last economic downturn, Surprise has seen recent extraordinary growth. During the 1990s alone the population of Surprise doubled to 30,000. And by 2006 Surprise had an estimated population of 103,000 – an increase of over 300 per cent in only 6 years. The city anticipates that there are still three decades of furious growth to come, which will eventually bring the population to an expected 650,000 (Mahler, 2005).

Radiant Church sits – so to speak – in the sprawl of sprawl. Located on the outskirts of the many cul-de-sacs dotting its new exurb, Radiant's 22-acre campus resembles a shopping mall or an industrial park: surrounded by a huge parking lot accommodating no less than 3,000 vehicles, it houses several buildings of various sizes. On a typical Sunday, the heavy traffic flowing into the campus is guarded by a city patrolman. Inside the lot, parking attendants in orange safety vests direct the entering vehicles to the vacant spaces.

Described by *The New York Times* as something looking more like an overgrown ski lodge than a place of worship (Mahler, 2005), the polygon-shaped main church building is in fact reminiscent of the tents used in the nineteenth century for religious revivals (not surprisingly, at another leading US Megachurch, New Life Church in Colorado Springs, CO, the central building is nicknamed “the Tent”). A far cry from the grandiose architecture of the Crystal Cathedral, Radiant Church's sober, understated architecture serves well the purpose of reinforcing the idea, current among builders of Megachurches today, that “religion is not a thing apart from daily life” (Goldberger 1995). In the foyer of the main building, five 50-inch plasma-screen televisions, a bookstore and a franchise Starbucks coffee shop cater to the large crowds. There are Xboxes for anyone to use, and the dress code is lax, mostly shorts and t-shirts.

At Radiant Church all age groups are represented, with an overwhelming majority of families with small or teenage children, for whom the church provides ad-hoc age-group activities, from a day

care center to pastoral outreach for youths and adults. Overwhelmingly white, worshipers reflect the racial makeup of Surprise (76 per cent Caucasian), barring its Hispanic component, which is 20 per cent in Surprise but almost non-existent at Radiant. On a typical Sunday morning, many worshipers carry Bibles “in new translation” (the church store sells a wide variety of Bibles, color-coded according to translation, ranging from “easy to read” to “close to the original text”) and enjoy the several comforts offered by the worship environment.

The main auditorium is a huge, square room with v-shaped rows of comfortably padded chairs, sitting approximately two thousand people. The stage – one could hardly call it an altar – bears no religious symbols: instead of the cross, three giant monitors above the stage direct the congregation’s attention to the action unfolding on-stage. On the day I and my daughter visited Radiant, a the large Christian rock band of mostly 20-something youths opened both morning services, alternating ballads and more rock-oriented numbers which built towards an up-tempo finale explicitly derivative of Eddie Van Halen’s 1980s hit “Jump.” Entitled “Friend of God,” this last tune seemed to capture the essence of a new kind of American religion that Megachurches seem to promote: the idea of God as a household presence, a mentor and a source of personal happiness and fulfillment. A new “narcissist” version of faith as addressing personal concerns and individual needs, the song’s lyrics spoke of a God whose “mindful” and “amazing” love constantly focuses on the faithful seeker:

Who am I that you are mindful of me / That you hear me when I call
Is it true that you are thinking of me / How you love me, it’s amazing!
I’m a friend of God / I’m a friend of God
I’m a friend of God / He calls me friend

Unfailingly revealing a new brand of personalized spirituality, the song was not ashamed to place God and worshiper on the same level: in fact, the emphasis on I/me was arguably the centerpiece of a song which portrayed God not under the traditional guise of “father” or “authority,” but rather as a peer, always ready to understand and satisfy the needs of its faithful.

The same overall approach seemed at work during the sermon, which senior pastor Lee McFarland delivered from behind a podium.

Kicked-off by a couple of informal jokes on the local football team, Pastor Lee's Bible lecture centered on the new Testament narrative of Zacchaeus, the tax collector (whom Pastor Lee familiarly referred to as "Zac"), who gave up his wealth to be saved by Jesus. As the lecture progressed through seven key passages taken from Luke, Corinthians, and Mark, all of which were promptly highlighted in succession on the giant screens via PowerPoint slides, worshipers were encouraged to stay active by quickly filling in blanks in response cards they had received upon entering the church. A combination of Bible teaching and Sunday school, McFarland's method revealed an essentialist, anti-intellectualistic mode of teaching the gospel, whose genius, as James Wind points out, lies in "its simplicity, its accessibility even to unlettered minds" (Wind 1994, 681), focusing not on theological doctrines but on finding "analogues in one's life to the biblical narratives" (Miller 1999, 424). In the message of that particular sermon, salvation was coming our way and that it was up to us not to miss the calling.

More prosaically, Pastor Lee's sermon also served as a reminder of the most emphasized concept at Megachurches: the need to keep up the weekly cash flow allowing to pay off the massive mortgages incurred in building the Church, whose survival depends mostly on its financial solvency.

Lakewood Church, Houston, TX

Radiant Church well fits the profile of *Outreach Magazine's* top-100 growing churches in America: it is a newly-established congregation, it proliferates in the outreaches of the post-suburban sprawl, and it offers a distinct alternative to the generalized look and feel of what people traditionally define as a church. Not only are Megachurches large, informal, and more and more resembling the mega-malls on the other side of the highway, but they are also focused on delivering a different kind of religious message, less focused on dogma and theological finesse, but rather addressing personal concerns and fulfilling individual needs. It is what Bill McKibben has recently defined an

“über-American” notion of religion grounded in this country’s “Christian Paradox,” a belief shared by three-fourths of the population and according to which “the core of America’s individualist politics and culture [...] actually appears in Holy Scripture” (McKibben 2005). And at the heart of this paradox is the idea that the Bible essentially teaches that God helps those who help themselves.¹²

Such creed is probably best summarized in the message delivered weekly at pastor Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, America’s largest Megachurch. Established, like Radiant Church, in the heart of one of America’s fastest growing regional cities of the South-West, Lakewood Church holds its services in a 16,000-seat former sports arena, the renovation of which cost \$ 100 million for the year 2008 alone. Osteen co-pastors with his wife of 20 years Victoria, a somewhat controversial figure whom the press characterized in the summer of 2008 as “imperious, combative and possibly racist”¹³ after reportedly assaulting a flight attendant (she was later cleared of assault charges in a civil suit).

In his Sunday sermons, Osteen preaches what is known as “the prosperity Gospel,” the idea that “God is a loving, forgiving God, who will reward believers with health, wealth and happiness.” A far cry from the revivalists’ “angry God” of earlier centuries, Osteen’s God “is a good God”: “no matter what we have done, where we have been, God has a great plan for our lives, and when we walk in his way, he’ll take us to places we have never dreamed of” (Pitts 2008).

Osteen’s books (which earn him millions of dollars each year) capitalize on these notions, and develop a peculiar mix of evangelicalism and personal growth message which arguably reads more like a self-help manual than theology: “God’s people should be the happiest people on earth! So happy, in fact, that other people notice. Why? Because we not only have a fabulous future, but we can enjoy life today! That’s what living your best life now is all about” (Osteen 2009, 353); “[l]et me encourage you to raise your expectations; start seeing yourself receiving good things. Expect the favor of God. Expect his blessing. Expect increase. Expect promotion. Get up and face each day with enthusiasm, knowing that God has great things in store for you” (Osteen 2004, 19).

Described as “the Most Influential Christian in America,” Joel Osteen defined himself in a recent interview to CBS News not so much as a pastor, but rather as “a life coach, a motivator,” someone who helps people “experience the life that God has for them,” – a view which has prompted many critics to see his theology as a way of deluding and numbing down the Christian message. For many of his critics, Osteen is the proponent of a fast-growing brand of so-called “Christianity Lite,” a doctrine of “positive thinking,” based on the claim that God intends for you to be rich and healthy right here in this life. In this view, also represented by such televangelists as Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn and Creflo Dollar, all mention of sin is avoided (including the “sins” of abortion and homosexuality) and great emphasis is placed on the promise that you can have anything you want simply by “visualizing” it or, as Osteen puts it, “believing for it” – a doctrine derided by some Christian critics as “name it and claim it” (Ehrenreich 2008, 227; Allit 2003, 230).

And yet, Osteen’s church fills its 16,000 seats to capacity at each of its several weekend services, to deliver what CSB news has defined “an uninhibited celebration that’s part rock concert, part spectacular” (Pitts 2008). Including people “from every race and every denomination and every background”, Osteen’s flock cuts across American society and finds its denominator in being “excited about God” – a qualification of religious experience that one would rarely find among more traditional groups and denominations. According to Osteen, his people come to the Megachurch in an “an attitude of expectancy,” which the pastor is eager to fulfill: “we cheer and we shout and there’s joy. And I try to leave them better off than they were before” (*ibid.*).

A ministry that reaches millions of faithful in America and one hundred countries around the world (see above), Lakewood Church provides a crucial case-study of the ongoing transformation of religion in North America.

Free-Market Theology

Each in their own different ways, Rick Warren's, Joel Osteen's and Lee McFarland's versions of Christianity are symptomatic of a radical transformation in America's attitude towards religion as such, on at least two counts.

On the one hand, the new churches reach out to a nation which, in a recent study of "Material Christianity", Colleen McDannell has defined as seeking religion less as "a type of knowledge learned through reading holy books and listening to holy men", but rather rooted in "physical expressions [that] are not exotic or eccentric elements [to] be relegated to a particular community or a specific period of time" (McDannell 1995, 1). In other words, people attending Megachurches today are on a continuum with an all-American mode of viewing religion as an "extension" of their daily lives, an experience that is anchored not to far-fetched rites and ideas, but rather that is contiguous with the culture they inhabit on a daily basis. For Americans today, it is a culture rooted in the consumption of commodities and entertainment, as well as in the quest for a community of like-minded individuals.

On the other hand, Megachurches testify of a conservative shift in religious attitudes in America and hence, given the centrality of faith in American life documented earlier in this essay, for American society as a whole. Socially conservative, Megachurches typically reflect the shift towards fundamentalism of American religion in recent decades (see above), as they sell their city-fleeing middle-class faithful the idea of having come to the exurb to find a "blessed" environment, where to retake, from their new-built temples to the Lord, their forsaken promised lands, and remake them in the likeness of their "Christian" dream, which in fact reads "American" (Sharlet 2005).

The recent resurgence of the religious right in America has found fertile ground among Megachurches and their version of non-denominational Christianity, where individual entrepreneurship emerges as the theological equivalent of free market economics. Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Church* (1995, see also above in this

article), the gold standard for Megachurch builders, reads – more than a handbook on how to grow a Christian community – rather like a perfect manual of entrepreneurship, business and investment. And although claiming that a healthy church should be focused on its purpose rather than on growth, Warren sees churches as free players on the market for religious seekers, competing with each other in tapping a growing demand: if your church is healthy and focused on “[delivering] the goods,” Warren argues, growth will occur naturally: “to maintain consistent growth, you must offer people something they cannot get anywhere else” (Warren 1995, 48). In this version of capitalist theology lies the ideological foundation for America’s large churches, which see in the success of Warren’s Saddleback Church (besides its own success, Saddleback has spawned thousands of so-called daughter churches throughout the country) a template for their own aspirations.

From the “cities upon the hill” of their exurban sanctuaries, Megachurches provide an antidote to the sins of city life, promising their middle class adherents a respite from evils of contemporary life, from pollution to liberalism, from homosexuality to atheistic school teaching. Not surprisingly, one of America’s most influential social conservative political organizations, James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family*, is a ministry associated with New Life Church of Colorado Springs, CO, one of the most influential Megachurches of the US South-West. And as Megachurches, by the sheer thrust of their size, develop into fully fledged players in the market process (Megachurches employ a large workforce, bear heavy financial obligation to the banks and desperately rely on tithing as their primary source of income), their mixture of God and capital leave the European observer both puzzled and awed.

Yet, in spite of any possible criticism, these “new paradigm churches” seem to deliver precisely what their new post-suburban constituencies expect: lively, vibrant congregations offering the reassurance that sameness can still be found in today’s America. In the new spatial and social configuration of the megaburbs of the American West and elsewhere, the Megachurch mix of conservative theology and cultural progressivism (Miller 1997, 12) reflects one of the major social changes America has witnessed over the last few dec-

ades, a “a second reformation,” shaped for the new millennium by “appropriating stylistic and organizational elements from our post-modern culture” (Miller 1997, 11).

Notes

- 1 Dale A. Herbeck. “Presidential Debate as Political Ritual: Clinton vs. Bush vs. Perot,” in *Bill Clinton on Stump, State, and Stage: The Rhetorical Road to the White House*, Stephen A. Smith, ed. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), pp. 249–272.
- 2 In the Baptist understanding, “the pastor is [...] the titular head of the church, a prophet-like figure, an administrator and policymaker who turns to the board of deacons for support and prayer but not necessarily for guidance” (Smith 1997, 13).
- 3 Most of these are Catholic churches. Catholics in the US, approximately 65 million people, are the single largest religious group in the country. Runner up is the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), with 16 million members (source: National Council of Churches USA, New York, NY, 2007 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches).
- 4 According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, Megachurches represent the top 0.36% of all 335,000 churches in America (source: The Hartford Institute, <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/index.html>).
- 5 According to Scott Thumma, “there are 4.5 million people attending the Megachurches each week. Accounting for people who consider “their home” a mega church, this number could easily reach 12 million people or as many as 10% of all participating church members in the United States” (Thumma 2007, 45).
- 6 Among America’s twenty largest Megachurches, eleven are in the American West. And among these, six are non-denominational, i.e. completely independent of any external religious organization, while three are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest of the evangelical denominations and for a long time dominated by conservatives closely aligned with the right wing of the Republican Party (FitzGerald 2008). Saddleback is a member of SBC.
- 7 Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (<http://religions.pewforum.org>).
- 8 For the terminological and semantic complexity and ambiguity of the term “Evangelical”, see “America’s Definition: What is an Evangelical?”, Ellison Research, Sept. 2008. http://www.ellisonresearch.com/releases/0908_ERWhitePaper.pdf.
- 9 *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) were the two landmark US Supreme Court decisions prohibiting state-sanctioned prayer and mandatory Bible reading in public schools.

- 10 Although it has lost members and clout in recent years, the Christian Coalition, founded by Pat Robertson, represented in the 1990s the largest religious-right organization in the US, known for the millions of voting guides it distributed to churches (FitzGerald, 2008).
- 11 “The bond between God and power”, *The Economist*, August 23, 2007.
- 12 In his notorious *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An essay in American religious sociology* of 1955, Will Herberg argued that “America is a consensus seeking society, with a strong religious catalyst driving the nature of the consensus sought [...] The USA has blended both Catholics and Jews into some version of Protestant American religious belief and practice [...] still more akin to the American notions of polity (separation of church and state, along with patriotic fervor) and society (freedom over equality, support for voluntary groups) and economy (frontier capitalism, with creativity and wealth ever prized) than to any set of globally consonant norms and values” (cited in Bruce B. Lawrence, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 36-7).
- 13 “Air-Rage Accusation Lands Megachurch Pastor in Court”, *The New York Times*, August 7, 2008.

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