

Religion and Religions in America

Part Two

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Protestant, Catholic, Jew—how true?

In the 1950s, Jewish sociologist Will Herberg wrote a book entitled *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, in which he argued that the once dominant Protestant majority in the United States had been altered by more than a century of Catholic and Jewish immigration. Although these three major groupings professed differing theological beliefs, in Herberg's view they had become three branches of a shared patriotic piety that revered a single God and cherished the ideals of "the American Way of Life."⁴²

Such a religious alliance was of necessity based on a low theological common denominator. "The typical American," Herberg wrote, "has developed a remarkable capacity for being serious about religion without taking religion seriously."⁴³ Americans "believe in religion in a way that perhaps no other people do" and consider it "a 'good thing,' a supremely 'good thing.'"⁴⁴ Such a construct must be vague, more Christian than Jewish, more Protestant than Catholic, but no denomination in particular. President Dwight D. Eisenhower said in 1954, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is."⁴⁵ His remark typified what British journalist Alistair Cooke noted about Americans, that they had "a vague but stubborn set of ideas about decency, and an equally vague but untroubled belief in God."⁴⁶

Less than a decade after publication, however, Herberg's view seemed too narrow. In 1965, the year Congressional legislation opened immigration for Asians into the United States, U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas observed that the United States was no longer simply a Christian nation or even a Christian and Jewish nation, but "a nation of Buddhists, Confucianists, and Taoists too."⁴⁷

Herberg's thesis drew devotees and developers. In 1967, sociologist Robert Bellah claimed that "there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America." This "public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" which Bellah called "the American civil religion."⁴⁸

A half century later, it is clear that Herberg and Bellah caught the "civic faith" of many Americans, which Sidney E. Mead called the "religion of the public," a kind of "religion in general." They captured the sense that Americans want to "prefer" or "adhere to" or "be numbered among," yet not be deeply committed to, or particularly well-informed about, specific religious teachings or claims.⁴⁹

Almost from the beginning, Americans have nurtured a sense that God had established America by special providence and for significant purpose. Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*, called Americans "the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our times." Americans "bear the ark of the liberties of the world."⁵⁰ In an

⁴² Martin E. Marty, "Herberg's Relevance," *Sightings*, May 9, 2005; http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2005/0509.shtml.

⁴³ Herberg is cited by Mark A. Noll, *et. al.*, *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 430.

⁴⁴ Will Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1960), 84.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Thomas A. Askew and Peter W. Spellman, *The Churches and the American Experience* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 199.

⁴⁶ Cited in *The Chicago Tribune* (December 23, 1979).

⁴⁷ Douglas is quoted from *United States vs. Seeger*, 380 U.S. (1965); citation and evaluation from Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003), 4.

⁴⁸ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 117 (Winter 1967): 1, 4.

⁴⁹ Marty, "Herberg's Relevance." *n.p.*

⁵⁰ Noll, *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America*, 170.

address to the New Jersey State Legislature, Abraham Lincoln called Americans "God's most chosen people."⁵¹ Ronald Reagan put it eloquently in 1982. "I have always believed," he said, "that this anointed land was set apart in an uncommon way, that a divine plan placed this great country here between two oceans to be found by a people from every corner of the Earth who had a special love of faith and freedom."⁵²

Some scholars today dismiss the views of Herberg and Bellah, saying that "what the United States is and ought to be has become a chorus of many of voices, each vying for a hearing."⁵³ Their civil religion thesis is said to "[fly] in the face of observed reality." Instead of "a single religion harmoniously uniting all Americans," the United States has experienced cultural conflict.⁵⁴ Yet "there is a reality behind the civil religion thesis that ought not to be overlooked in any discussion of the role of religion in the life of the nation." Political speeches continue to feature references to God and other religious rhetoric. Many citizens urge their government to take an active role in promoting public virtue by holding organized prayer times in public schools and posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings.⁵⁵ Civil religion calls upon citizens to be "good Americans" by voting, serving their country in the armed forces, and running for public office. Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Presidents' Day, and the birthday of Martin Luther King are the agreed-upon holidays of civil religion. Much of what Americans do at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter also shows that these most distinctly Christian holidays—particularly Christmas and Easter—have been secularized and civilized.⁵⁶

Joseph L. Price has argued that "more than any other single event in American sport culture, the Super Bowl enjoys the sanction of the government as a high holiday for American civil religion." Pre-game ceremonies for the 2005 Super Bowl featured the appearance of two former presidents as World War II heroes were honored for preserving freedom and democracy. The football field itself was "hallowed" by the National Anthem, performed by the choirs of the service academies and accompanied by the U.S. Army Herald Trumpets. More than a football game, Price said the Super Bowl "constitutes a religious phenomenon, providing a prominent public ceremony for patriotic display, while blending several symbol systems that shape the worldviews of many Americans." The fusion of sport, entertainment, political values, and huge economic profit makes the Super Bowl "a devotional festival for the practitioners of American civil religion."⁵⁷

Evangelical entrepreneurs

Many Mainliners were told growing up that they should not talk about (and certainly not argue about) politics or religion. Civil religion has generally presented a theology too vague to debate and too bland to be noticed. Evangelicalism shows a different face.

Included in Evangelicalism is the growing number of nondenominational and megachurches throughout the country. (How frequently do we see Lutheran, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, or even Baptist churches in old towns and new suburbs losing ground—and Catholic churches barely holding steady—while community, Evangelical, Nondenominational, or Bible churches are flourishing and gaining many of the sons and daughters of the diminishing Mainliners?)

Included in Evangelicalism are the popular preachers of revivalism and televangelism. Billy Graham, though now in his late 80s and looking increasingly fragile, remains the king. Other well-known names are Jerry Falwell, T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Charles Stanley, Franklin Graham, James Dobson, Pat Robertson, Rick

⁵¹ Louis Weeks, *A New Chosen Nation* (McGrath Publishing Company, 1977), 130.

⁵² Ronald Reagan, November 23, 1982; in "How the Bible Made America," *Newsweek* (December 27, 1982).

⁵³ Corbett, *Religion in America*, 28.

⁵⁴ Philip E. Hammond, Amanda Porterfield, James G. Moseley, and Jonathan D. Sarna, "Forum: American Civil Religion Revisited," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 4 (Winter 1994): 21.

⁵⁵ Corbett, *Religion in America*, 29.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Easter Parade: Piety, Fashion, and Display," *Religion and American Culture* 4 (Summer 1994): 135-64.

⁵⁷ Joseph L. Price, "More Than a Game," *Sightings*, February 10, 2005; http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2005/0210.shtml.

Warren, Tim and Beverly La Haye, Stuart and Jill Briscoe, Stuart Epperson, Joyce Meyer, Charles Colson, Bill Hybels, and more.

Included in Evangelicalism is the very public presence of the former Moral Majority; the Religious Right; Promise Keepers; Christian radio stations, Christian music, Christian message T-shirts, bumper stickers; and other manifestations of what Colleen McDannell has called "material Christianity."⁵⁸ Evangelicalism is also represented by America's favorite Evangelical, Ned Flanders.⁵⁹

Included in Evangelicalism are Fundamentalist churches and the thinking that lay at Fundamentalism's roots. (A *Fundamentalist*, has been deftly defined by George Marsden as "an Evangelical who is angry about something.")⁶⁰ Marsden and others have pointed to the time following World War I as "a pivotal moment for Protestants fearful that German biblical criticism and sociological forces unleashed by the war might cut away at the foundations of 'Christian America.'"⁶¹ A widely circulated set of booklets entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, published between 1910 and 1915 and containing more than 100 articles, defended the basics of the faith: the Bible is the inspired and errorless Word of God; Jesus was God in the flesh, born of a virgin, lived without sinning, died on the cross as the substitute for sinners, and would return physically and visibly to earth.⁶² (While Synodical Conference Lutherans repeatedly refused to be identified with the Fundamentalists, they nonetheless "loved the Fundamentalists most for the enemies they made.")⁶³ By obverse definition, Evangelicalism is "less angry" and less insistent on these fundamentals (exploring occasionally to what degree Scripture is inerrant or how exclusively Christ is to be regarded as the only way to salvation), yet it still bears the roots of that more conservative antecedent movement.

Included in Evangelicalism also are Pentecostal and charismatic elements—from Charles Parham Fox and William Joseph Seymour and the Azusa Street mission in Los Angeles; to Aimee Semple McPherson and the Foursquare Gospel Church, also in Los Angeles; to Oral Roberts to originators of the charismatic movement in Mainline churches—Larry Christensen in Lutheranism, Dennis Bennet in Episcopalianism, and more. Today, the Pentecostal name includes millions of Americans who belong to more than 300 separate denominations, most of them tiny. Despite their diversity, Pentecostals share the belief that conversion to Christianity must be followed by a second life-transforming event, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, manifest by the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues.⁶⁴

And included in Evangelicalism is George W. Bush. The President's denominational journey has constituted a modern American "pilgrim's progress" and "a classic of evangelical rescue." From his father's Connecticut Episcopalianism to his mother's New York Presbyterianism to his wife's Texas Methodism, Bush professed a "born again" experience under the mentoring of Billy Graham, turned away from alcohol, strengthened his family life, and reached the pinnacle of worldly success. Asked during the 2000 presidential campaign which philosopher had most influenced his life, Bush answered "in the spirit of Wesleyan sanctification" and without a hint of irony, "Christ, because he changed my heart." He explained, "When you

⁵⁸ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁵⁹ See Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 42-59.

⁶⁰ Cited in *Time* magazine (September 2, 1985).

⁶¹ Andrew Manis, "Protestants: From Denominational Controversialists to Culture Warriors," in *Religion and Public Life in the Southern Crossroads: Showdown States*, ed. William Lindsey and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2005), 61.

⁶² Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 381.

⁶³ Edward C. Fredrich, "The Difference between Fundamentalism and Orthodoxy," (paper presented to the Minnesota District pastoral conference, New Ulm, Minn.: April 24, 1968), 9. See also Milton L. Rudnick, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), x.

⁶⁴ Jane Harris, "Holiness and Pentecostal Traditions: Making the Spirit Count," in *Religion and Public Life in the Southern Crossroads: Showdown States*, ed. William Lindsey and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2005), 79-80.

turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that's what happened to me."⁶⁵

So what is Evangelicalism? It has been characterized as a "constellation of beliefs," chief of which are that the Scriptures are inspired by God and constitute the ultimate authority for faith and life; that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God, whose life was characterized by supernatural power and divine authority; that salvation is based on the grace of God, not human goodness, and comes through personal faith in Christ; and that conversion includes not only believing in Jesus but living a holy life and sharing the good news with others.

Evangelicals combine a commitment to "more or less historic Christian orthodoxy" with "a particular view of the Christian life as personal conversion and ongoing renewal." Yet there are also particular qualities that distinguish Evangelicals from Mainline Protestants while bonding them with one another. As members of such an "extended family," Evangelicals "are free to develop their own distinct traditions," which can generate conflict. Evangelicals "frequently fight, compete, and question each other's parentage," yet they have generally been able to "recognize the family resemblance" they possess and "pull in the same theological and missional direction."⁶⁶

In a similar vein, Julia Mitchell Corbett has observed that Evangelicals "certainly believe that conversion is a result of the action of God's grace upon a person," yet they also emphasize "the important role of human free will in the process." Thus, an ongoing tension with both confessional Lutherans and traditional Calvinists arises over "decision theology," use of an "altar call," or making a "decision for Christ." Corbett continues (in a key insight): "Evangelicalism is more concerned with the quality of religious experience than with belief in particular doctrines."⁶⁷

Denominational boundaries, sometimes rigidly observed between and even within Mainline denominations, are "exceptionally fluid" within Evangelicalism. Evangelicals exhibit "a pragmatic philosophy asserting that what matters is the core evangelical belief."⁶⁸ This is not to say that theology is unimportant to Evangelicals. Their theology "demands commitment, proclaims that the faith is absolute and ultimate, and that one must witness and show others the truth of its claims." A combination of "sectarianism" and an "entrepreneurial spirit" creates churches that are "appealing in lifestyle, aesthetics, and values of their market, all the while creating converts to a belief system that gives certainty, outlines a specific behavioral code of ethics, and demands reproduction" through personal evangelism. This clarity is particularly appealing in a culture that often lacks precise answers to moral and religious questions. Children and young people are "raised in a relatively demanding moral and religious atmosphere, combined with an engaging aesthetic that appeals to them in the form and formula of popular culture."⁶⁹

Evangelicals still like to complain that they do not receive fair treatment from the secular media. William Donohue, head of the Catholic League, said his anti-defamation group "logs dozens of cases each month in which Christians are compared to the Taliban or otherwise denigrated for their beliefs," often in films and on television. Evangelicals perceive themselves as especially powerless on social issues such as gay marriage, even though many states have approved bans on the practice. Opponents to Evangelicals are baffled by the complaint. Bill Leomard, dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School, says Evangelicals think they are oppressed only because some Americans disagree with them. "They want to be culture dominant," he says.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ William Lindsey and Mark Silk, "Showdowns," in *Religion and Public Life in the Southern Crossroads: Showdown States*, ed. William Lindsey and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2005), 167-68.

⁶⁶ Timothy P. Weber, "Fundamentalism Twice Removed: The Emergence and Shape of Progressive Evangelicalism," in Jay P. Dolan and James P. Wind, eds., *New Dimensions in American Religious History, Essays in honor of Martin E. Marty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 265.

⁶⁷ Corbett, *Religion in America*, 172.

⁶⁸ James K. Wellman, Jr., "The Churching of the Pacific Northwest: The Rise of Sectarian Entrepreneurs," in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 93.

⁶⁹ Wellman, "The Churching of the Pacific Northwest," 81.

⁷⁰ Rachel Zoll, "Despite Gains, Evangelicals Still Feel Persecuted," Associated Press, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (August 27, 2005): 5B.

Who is an Evangelical? According to the Barna Group, only 7% of U.S. adults say they are Evangelicals, which seems an extremely low number. Yet 33% of U.S. adults classify themselves as "born again" but not Evangelical. Thirty-one percent of self-identified Evangelicals are college educated, ten percentage points higher than the national average. (This figures conflicts with the oft-made observation in religious polls that the more education one has received, the less committed one is to religious beliefs and the less likely one is to say that religion is important in one's life). Forty percent of Evangelicals live in the South. Evangelicals are more than 5 times less likely than adults nationwide to say that "their careers come first." Ninety-six percent describe themselves as "deeply spiritual," compared to the U.S. average reply, 61%.⁷¹

According to another reckoning, about 22% of Americans consider themselves Catholic; 17% Baptist; 6% Methodist; 5% Lutheran; 4% each for Adventist, "Christian," or non-denominational; 3% each for Presbyterian, Assembly of God, and Episcopal; 2% Pentecostal; 1% Protestant, Church of Christ, African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God, or Reformed—and 1% say they are Evangelical (Free or Covenant). A full 15% do not identify themselves as Christians. But if the numbers are reckoned differently—if you ask, "Do you consider yourself 'born again?'"—88% of Assembly of God members; 86% of non-denominational Christians; 80% of Pentecostals; 69% of Baptists; 55% of Presbyterians; 48% of Lutherans; 47% of Methodists; 42% of Mormons; 34% of Episcopalians; 22% of Catholics, will answer yes.⁷²

What is distinctive about Evangelicals?

No Cross. Perhaps that appears to be an overstatement, but when we consider how central the cross is in Christian teaching and how prominently it has been displayed throughout Christian history, one is taken aback by the comment made by Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church, in response to ABC News reporter Peter Jennings' observation that there was not a single cross to be seen at Willow Creek. "We're very serious about what Christ did on the cross," Hybels explained, "but to capture the essence of Christianity in a single symbol is a little dangerous, we feel."⁷³

Religious themes in contemporary and popular musical style. At many Evangelical churches there is "no religious music in the traditional sense of the word. There are praise songs—with the lyrics flashed up on Power Point," but you will never hear the legacy of religious music. Belief is talked about not in theological but sociological terms. Teachings of Luther, Calvin, and other denominational fathers "run counter to quintessentially American belief that you're in charge." One observer concluded that "what really matters is that you are one with the Lord. The specifics are not that important." An Evangelical minister remarked, "If we use the words redemption or conversion in our sermons, they think we are talking about bonds."⁷⁴

State-of-the-art technology. Even Evangelicals who worship in modest church buildings will often have drums, electric guitars, synthesizers, numerous microphones, and a better-than-average sound system with mixing board. Evangelical broadcast ministries have sometimes been called things like "The Old Time Gospel Hour," appealing to a less complicated, more conservative time in worshipers' nostalgic memories, yet their music and technology is typically cutting edge.

Evangelical pastors function "more like emcees hosting celebrations than leaders of liturgy."⁷⁵ For this reason, worshipers accustomed to liturgical worship are sometimes heard to remark that the Evangelical service felt more like a concert or even like a late-night talk show than "church." (Lutheran college students, after attending Evangelical megachurch services, have concluded, "I didn't feel like I went to church.")

Messages tend to focus on empowerment for dealing with life's everyday stresses. It is not unusual, according to one observer, to find Evangelical preachers "employing psycho-therapeutic language about

⁷¹ "Beliefs: General Religious," The Barna Group; <http://www.barna.org/flexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=2>.

⁷² "Denominations," The Barna Group; <http://www.barna.org/flexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=16>.

⁷³ "In the Name of God," ABC News, MPI Home Video, 1995.

⁷⁴ Alan Wolfe, "Evangelical Entrepreneurialism: How Religion is Shaped by American Culture," *The Berlin Journal* 10 (Spring 2005):15-17.

⁷⁵ Wellman, "The Churaching of the Pacific Northwest," 90.

salvation, equating salvation with deliverance from a poor-self image and calling individuals to receive salvation in order to assure both eternal life in the next world and material prosperity in this one."⁷⁶

Mark Noll has suggested that Evangelical megachurches are "repackaging some of the Methodist ethos into new forms for the suburbs." Like early Methodists, megachurches "are innovative in their efforts at reaching and sustaining adherents"; they "have pioneered in the production and use of a new hymnody"; they "have their fingers on the pulse of popular sentiment"; and they are "skilled in presenting their views on religion and other matters with a minimum of public offense." The megachurches seem to find an attractive middle ground, "less obviously liberal than the proprietary mainline and less overly conservative than the sectarian evangelical."⁷⁷

"Evangelicals look at an issue," says Robert Wuthnow, "particularly a theological issue, and they'll say, 'It's really simpler than you thought—Jesus is the answer,' or 'It's right here in the Bible.' A mainline Protestant will look at it and say, 'It's really much more complex than you thought. You've got this side and that side.'"⁷⁸

A useful way of comparing Evangelicals to Mainline denominations is provided by Lyle Schaller in his book, *The Interventionist*. Schaller asks, Are the roots of your church in Europe or in America? While not every comparison is equally applicable, many prompt further reflection.

- European church roots have a heritage centered on worship, orthodoxy, and the sacraments; American church roots find their heritage centered on the transformation of individual lives.
- In European-rooted churches, trust is centered in the clergy; in American-rooted churches, trust is centered in the laity.
- European-rooted churches affirm past traditions, accomplishments and denominational heritage; American-rooted churches affirm future opportunities, potentialities, and challenges.
- European-based churches see consumerism as a problem; American-based churches accept consumerism as a fact of life.
- In European-based churches, individualism is sacrificed to loyalty to the institution or denomination; in American-based churches, individualism is affirmed and resources are customized to fit individual needs.
- In European-based churches, pastors are evaluated by the approval of other pastors and upon completion of a profession education; in American-based churches, pastors are evaluated by the perceptions of parishioners and the unchurched.
- Seminaries in European-based churches reflect a European culture and academic theological requirements; seminaries in American-based churches reflect culture differences, Christian character, commitment, and recognition of spiritual gifts.
- European-based churches are uncomfortable with the megachurch; American-based churches embrace the megachurch.
- In European-based churches, clergy are educated apart from the laity; in American-based churches, clergy are educated among the laity.
- European-based churches derive their identity from their European founders, their denominational histories, and their ecclesiastical real estate and traditions; American-based churches derive their identity from the ministries pursued in their congregations and among their constituencies.
- Clergy in European-based churches dress for worship in elaborate dress that reflects their traditional heritage; clergy in American-based churches dress for worship in simple dress that reflects American expectations.
- Sermons in European-based churches are delivered from behind the pulpit; sermons in American-based churches are delivered without a pulpit or among the congregation.

⁷⁶ Leonard, "The Southern Crossroads: Religion and Demography," 30.

⁷⁷ Mark Noll, "Protestants: An Enduring Methodist Tinge," in *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America's Common Denominator?* ed. Philip Barlow and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 79-80.

⁷⁸ Robert Wuthnow, "Exploring Religious America," part 2, *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*, May 3, 2002;

<http://www.pbs.org/wnetireligionandethics/week535/specialreport.html>.

- The vocabulary employed in European-based churches reflects the European heritage of the faith; the vocabulary employed in American-based churches is fitted to contemporary churchgoers.⁷⁹

Evangelical Christianity runs the risk of "becoming more a means of meeting human needs than of glorifying God." Instead of asking, "Is it true?" Evangelical theology is tempted to ask, "Does it work?" Worship can focus more on providing a comfortable, customer-driven atmosphere for seekers. "Evangelicalism may be in danger of adopting some of the worst features of Fundamentalism (such as shallowness and emotionalism) and of modernism (man-centered pragmatism)."⁸⁰

Worthy of observation is the Emerging Church. A 70-something religious scholar, reporting on the 2004 Emergent Convention and National Pastors Convention in San Diego, wrote, "Most of the participants were youngish and of the evangelical stripe, but with a goodly cast of mainstream Protestants." He said that "energy marks all that this company does. They work with youth and are often themselves young." Sounding old, he said, "The rather frenetic character of music, performance, and activity on the main stage surrounding serious speakers was almost numbing." Ironically, "while many speakers criticized post-modernism in secular forms, the overall scene here was of post-modernity in church action. Few voices spoke up for, pointed to, or reminded folks that the Christian church has a tradition, that many things happened between the birth of the church and March 10, 2004." Some participants "trashed the hymnody, worship forms, liturgies, theological formulations, and historical moments of the intervening twenty centuries," while most "simply ignored them as unusable to the 'post-modern' mentality." Though there was much criticism of current culture, "much of what went on there showed total ease with popular culture."⁸¹

A younger attendee and participant in the Emerging Church offered some counter views. The movement "did indeed begin with a group of what Robert Webber has called 'younger evangelicals.'" Even for the not necessarily younger, "this group represents a rising voice of dissatisfaction with the religiously-right, highly pragmatic, Biblically neo-Fundamentalist and generally conservative Evangelical establishment." Described as "post-evangelical," it remains to be seen if current Evangelicals will welcome it, or send the conversation off the premises. Many emergent leaders "are moving beyond an early preoccupation with "how to do church better" and shifting to a more "missional focus" of seeking God's kingdom and doing more effectively "the prophetic work of seeking justice, showing compassion, and walking humbly with God." The high energy and "numbing" noise levels offer "a welcome refreshment for many who find the dullness of their home churches numbing in other ways." Yet even this younger participant had to ask, "To what degree does this energy flow from pop culture hype (rock concerts with fog machines, etc.) or from genuine spiritual vibrancy?"⁸²

Two of the three largest Lutheran church bodies in the United States contain the word "Evangelical" in their official names. Are Lutherans also among the Evangelicals? The American Religious Data Archive places The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and several smaller Lutheran groups among Evangelicals in this broader American sense, and puts the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America among the evangelicals in the sense used by Luther during the Reformation.⁸³ In 1972, Dean Kelley described Lutherans as "newcomers to the mainstream."⁸⁴ In 1987, Robert Wuthnow included Lutherans in the moderate mainline with Methodist, Disciples of Christ, Northern Baptist, and Reformed churches.⁸⁵ The Wisconsin Synod should not be

⁷⁹ Lyle E. Schaller, *The Interventionist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 91-104.

⁸⁰ John F. Brug, review of *The Evangelical Heart and Mind*, by Millard Erickson; in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 91 (Summer 1994): 235.

⁸¹ Martin E. Marty, "Emergent," *Sightings*, March 22, 2004; http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2004/0322.shtml.

⁸² Brian McLaren, "Emergent Conversation," *Sightings*, April 1, 2004; http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2004/0401.shtml.

⁸³ L. DeAnn Lagerquist, "The Lutheran Difference: What More Than Nice?" in *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: American's Common Denominator?* ed. Philip Barlow and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 88.

⁸⁴ Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper Collins, 1972).

⁸⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

categorized as Fundamentalist but as "classically conservative." Fundamentalists "aggressively react to threats to their personal and social identities," a characteristic this observer did not feel fit the WELS.⁸⁶

II The nones and the nons

The nones

The fastest growing designation in American religion is "no preference" or "none." New England contains some of the least religious states in the United States. In the Midwest, 41% of the population is either unattached to or unaccounted for by some organized religion. The Pacific Northwest has the highest percentage of "Nones." Fewer people in Oregon, Washington, and Alaska affiliate with a religious institution than in any other part of the United States, as it has long been in that part of the country.⁸⁷

Part of our understanding of religious "nones" lies in the differing methods employed to gather religious preference data. One method is conducted by taking a random sampling of residents through a telephone poll and asking respondents to self-identify their religious preference. The most wide-ranging example of this method is the American Religious Identification Survey, conducted in 2001. The second method involves totaling the announced membership figures of all the identifiable churches and religious organizations in a given geographic area, then comparing that figure as a percentage of the area's total population. These two methods will yield results differing by as much as 20 percentage points. In analyzing results, researchers must balance the two figures to arrive at reasonably reliable estimates rather than allowing either method to trump the other.⁸⁸

Another part of our understanding of the "nones" is that "no religion" does not necessarily mean "secular." Many who answer "none" or who in other ways indicate no religious preference may nonetheless say they regularly meditate, pray, and even attend church.⁸⁹ Most "nones" in the United States "are neither agnostic nor atheist" but "spiritually inclined, despite lacking meaningful ties to an established religious tradition." Debunking several presumed stereotypes, "nones" in the Pacific Northwest "are mostly white; slightly more than half are married and at least forty years old; relatively few have children under age seventeen; a majority are men and employed full-time; seven in ten own their own home; and fewer than one in ten are without a high school degree." The resulting demographic composite of a "none" is a "well-educated, white, middle class, male baby-boomer living in a metropolitan area with a wife and no young children"—certainly counter to the stereotype of a grungy Gen-X refugee from the East Coast.⁹⁰

The "nones" also include the more traditional designations of "agnostic" and "atheist." To be an "atheist," one "need only disbelieve in God, be that God personal, a force, or an idea." Since more than 90% of Americans consistently profess to believe in God or a god, the cohort for atheism must be relatively small. But Americans who disbelieve in formal religion often choose instead to define their disenchantment as "agnosticism," claiming not to know or not able to know whether there is a god because the evidence is weak, or

⁸⁶ Martin E. Marty, e-mail to Mark Braun, November 22, 2004.

⁸⁷ Patricia O'Connell Killen, "Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the Future: Religion in the None Zone," in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 9-10.

⁸⁸ Philip Barlow, "A Demographic Portrait: America Writ Small?" in *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America's Common Denominator?* ed. Philip Barlow and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 26-27.

⁸⁹ Stephen Prothero, "The Demographic Layout: A Tale of Two New Englands," in *New England: Steady Habits Changing Slowly*, ed. Andrew Walsh and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 31-32.

⁹⁰ Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark A. Shibley, "Surveying the Religious Landscape: Historical Trends and Current Patterns in Oregon, Washington, and Alaska," with assistance from Kellee Boyer and Kellie A. Riley, in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 41.

through sheer indifference. The cohort for agnosticism is probably quite high, difficult to define, and with boundaries harder to discern.⁹¹

Among the arguments advanced for atheism or agnosticism are: that god is merely a projection of human needs; that there is no longer a place for god in a scientific world; that the very word *god* is unclear; that there can be no god, or that this god is useless in the face of so much suffering in the world; that there are many good people who do not believe; that people have autonomy and worth apart from a god; and that belief in god gets in the way of doing good on earth.⁹²

Siegbert Becker has noted that even in atheism, however, there is a kind of faith, and that "the atheist considers it to be a saving faith." Believing there is no God, the atheist "finds his hope for eternity. For if there is no God, no judgment, no heaven, and no hell, no survival of any kind after death, he can look forward to an eternity of peace." The atheist "may even welcome death as a release from pain and trouble."⁹³

The nons

The "nons" would include adherents to non-Christian religions. Some have been represented in the American religious picture from the beginning. Jews were aboard Columbus' first voyage to the New World, but for the next three centuries Jewish presence in America went largely unnoticed as Jewish immigrants practiced a more private and less visible version of their faith in Reform Judaism. From the 1880s into the early twentieth century, Jewish migration to the United States swelled and those who immigrated were more Orthodox and more visible.⁹⁴

Today there are resurgences of Orthodox Judaism but also non-observant Jews, Jewish by culture and habits more than by belief and deeds. "Modernity, enlightenment, social acceptance, and political liberties—all of which [Jewish people] treasure dearly and all of which have reached their greatest fulfillment in America—carry with them the consequence that Jews can choose *whether* as well as *how* to be Jewish," and many will choose not to engage their ancestral faith tradition.⁹⁵

Buddhism is more visible in the United States because of immigration from points in Japan, China, and southeast Asia, but also through conversion (of some sort) to Buddhist practice or ideals. Especially popular in Hollywood (Brad Pitt, Richard Gere, Keanu Reeves, Orlando Bloom, Kate Bosworth, Tina Turner, Mark Wahlberg, Uma Thurman, Jake Gyllenhal, Goldie Hawn, Phil Jackson, George Lucas, Jennifer Lopez, Oliver Stone, Steven Seagal, Alice Walker),⁹⁶ it finds expression in sympathetic media and political support for the plight of the Dalai Lama and in movies with Buddhist themes ("Seven Years in Tibet," "Kundun," "The Little Buddha," "The Cup," "Chasing Buddha," "Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?").⁹⁷

More visible in American life is the growing presence of Muslims, most from migration from Muslim countries, with the appearance of mosques and Islamic studies centers, but also through conversion by African American Christians. The story of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is typical of many, and his narrative is more articulate than most. Estranged from his Catholic upbringing, enraged by racism, and energized by the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, Abdul-Jabbar (then Lew Alcindor) rejected the Trinity as "some line of gibberish" the sisters in parochial school had told him to accept on faith. But Catholicism had fully ingrained monotheism into his religious thinking. Reading Malcolm X, Alcindor followed Malcolm through his odyssey with Black Muslims, "with their burned-toast black people and white-devil Caucasians," until Malcolm, shortly before his

⁹¹ Martin E. Marty, "The Pulse of American Atheism," *Sightings*, May 28, 2002; http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2002/0528.shtml.

⁹² Corbett, *Religion in America*, 128-30.

⁹³ Siegbert W. Becker, *The Holy Ghost and His Work* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1977), 24.

⁹⁴ Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: A Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 4th ed., (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 307-12.

⁹⁵ Arnold M. Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), x-xi.

⁹⁶ "Famous Adherents," http://www.adherents.com/adh_fam.html.

⁹⁷ "Guide to Religious Movies," <http://www.adherents.com/movies>.

murder, discovered "true Islam" on a hajj to Mecca. Malcolm learned and Alcindor read that "in the center of the Muslim world, people from all over the earth congregated to live in peace and share as brothers their commonly held belief and faith in Allah." Alcindor found it a religion more welcoming to African-Americans, adding, "The criteria of being a good Muslim was not your color or your culture" but "what you believed and what you practiced." For Alcindor, Islam was "a religion, a large portion of whose believers were black and which touched all my concerns. I saw myself as a victim of racism, and here first Malcolm and then the religion itself are pointing out immediately that racism is wrong." He concluded that "this is the way people are supposed to live," and "from that point on he was sold."⁹⁸

There may be more adherents to non-Christian religions than we are aware of, because in the practice of their faith many do not follow the worship or congregational patterns generally expected in the United States. Buddhists, Hindus, and Zoroastrians "do not regularly attend communal worship services in their home countries," except for special festivals. In their homelands and in their newly adopted lands, practitioners "have home altars at which many pray daily," containing "food, flowers, religious statues, pictures, incense, candles, prayer beads, and/or other objects of worship."⁹⁹

Numbers for "nons" are easy to come by but harder to count on. In 2001, there were 2,831,000 who self-identified as Jews,¹⁰⁰ but the American Jewish Identity Survey of that same year yielded a figure of 5.5 million.¹⁰¹ The American Religious Identification Survey of 2001 found just over one million Muslims in the United States, another one million Buddhists, and 775,000 Hindus, but the reporter of those numbers concluded that these figures were almost surely too low.¹⁰² The 2000 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches estimated the Muslim count in America at 3,950,000. Muslim leaders in 1999 said there were 6,500,000 Muslims in the United States. Newspaper accounts following 9/11 reported there were 8,000,000 Muslims in the United States.¹⁰³

Jewish population centers include much of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, southeastern New York state, New Jersey, the southern tip of Florida; and larger metropolitan regions: Boston, Buffalo, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Atlanta, Dallas, San Antonio, Kansas City, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Denver, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Seattle, the San Francisco Bay area, Los Angeles, and San Diego.¹⁰⁴

Muslims are scattered in counties of nearly every state of the Union, and are found in greater concentrations in New York City, the San Francisco Bay area, and southern California. Highest concentrations of Muslims are in and around Detroit and Washington, D.C.¹⁰⁵

Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Baha'i are measured by the number of temples per 100,000 population in areas throughout the United States. Temples are noted with some frequency throughout the northeastern states; in and around Washington, D.C.; in metropolitan areas of Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin; Chicago; Detroit; and in eastern Florida. Heaviest concentrations of temples are found in northern Arizona, New Mexico, and most predominantly along the entire west coast from the Puget Sound to San Diego.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁸ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *Giant Steps* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 165-68.

⁹⁹ Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard, eds., "Book Prospectus" for *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America* (forthcoming); cited by Lance D. Laird, "Religions of the Pacific Rim in the Pacific Northwest," in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 110.

¹⁰⁰ Martin E. Marty, "Behind the Count," *Sightings*, April 26, 2004; http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2004/0426.shtml.

¹⁰¹ American Jewish Identity Survey; <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/US-Israel/ajis.html>.

¹⁰² Prothero, "The Demographic Layout: A Tale of Two New Englands," 36.

¹⁰³ Marty, "Behind the Count."

¹⁰⁴ "Jews as a Percentage of all Residents, 2000," *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000*.

¹⁰⁵ "Muslims as a Percentage of all Residents, 2000," *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000*.

¹⁰⁶ Understanding the Religious Demographic Profile of Your Region: Findings from *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000* with a focus on the U.S. Southern Region and the state of Florida (presented at the Foundation for American Communications Seminar, Orlando, April 28, 2003; http://www.glenmary.org/grc/grc_resources.htm).

Religious is out, spirituality in

Newsweek magazine recently recalled the "God is Dead" lament, mentioned earlier. "What was dying in 1966," columnist Jerry Adler wrote, "was a well-meaning but arid theology born of rationalism: a wavering trumpet call for ethical behavior, a search for meaning in a letter to the editor in favor of civil rights." What has taken its place is "a passion for an immediate, transcendent experience of God," and "a uniquely American acceptance of the amazingly diverse paths people have taken to find it." What has not taken place is "an explosion of people going to church." A joint *Newsweek*/Beliefnet Poll found that especially among Americans younger than 60, 79% said they were "spiritual" but only 64% described themselves as "religious." Almost two-thirds of Americans say they pray every day, and nearly a third meditate.¹⁰⁷

The "religion is out, spirituality in" buzzword has been around for some time; it is highly individualistic and personal. Its classic expression remains that noted by Robert Bellah in his 1985 book *Habits of the Heart*. "One person we interviewed has actually named her religion after herself," Bellah wrote. "This suggests the logical possibility of over 220 million American religions, one for each of us." Sheila Larson had "received a good deal of therapy and describe[d] her faith as 'Sheilaism....Just my own little voice.'"¹⁰⁸ Scholars have said that since the 1990s, American society has become a "spiritual marketplace" in which the quest for self-fulfillment has led individuals to construct religious identities that are both changeable and multifaceted, blurring in the process the boundaries that divided one faith tradition from another. Direct, personal experience with the sacred trumps mediated, institutionalized experience with the sacred.¹⁰⁹

What can be included in "spirituality"? New Age sensitivities; supremacists and survivalists and earth-centered spiritualities; expressions of popular religion; sport as religion; feminine or feminist spiritualities; Native American spiritualities; 12-step programs; Wicca, Kwanzaa; and more.

The common denominator in many of these spiritualities, as evidenced in Sheilaism, is individuality. New Age spirituality, for example, "clearly represents a turn away from the hyper-rationality of modern institutions (the bureaucracy and dogma of churches and secular organizations alike)." Though some of these spiritualities find their roots in the primal impulses of Native American practices or in Eastern spiritualities like Hinduism and Buddhism, they also "fulfill a core value of modern Western culture, the elevation of the individual above the community" in what Emile Durkheim called "the cult of the individual." Michael Brown put it, "Channelers and their agents have elevated the protean impulse to a sacred principle." Or in Shirley MacLaine's words, "I am God. I am God. I am God."¹¹⁰

Popular religion exists under the aegis that "what counts as religion is not the sole preserve of academics."¹¹¹ Popular religion as it appears on radio programs, in newspaper columns, chat rooms, websites, and many other locations, has "mass appeal"—meaning "it sells." Popular religion is "of the people," not the sort of theology taught by the specialists in seminaries and graduate schools but that which appeals to a wide range of people who have "no special theological sophistication outside the context of formal 'Sunday morning' worship in the churches."¹¹²

The New Age Movement "can certainly be seen as another blossoming of the persistent metaphysical tradition in America" and "an area in which people in a secular culture can ask and answer theological questions

¹⁰⁷ Jerry Adler, "The Search for the Spiritual," *Newsweek* (September 5, 2005): 49-50.

¹⁰⁸ Robert N. Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1985), 220-21.

¹⁰⁹ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 33-35.

¹¹⁰ Mark A. Shibley, "Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest," in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, Religion by Region Series (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2004), 148.

¹¹¹ David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock'n'Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (Fall 1996): 760.

¹¹² Peter W. Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980), 3-4.

in non-doctrinal terms and outside the parameters of established religions institutions."¹¹³ New Age thought asserts that "the natural universe is inhabited by countless spiritual beings," which "range in temperament from vicious and nasty to comic and beneficent." In account after account of New Age practitioners, "personal beings—or forces with a personal dimension—keep turning up, call them what you will—demons, devils, spirits or angels."¹¹⁴

The numerous 12-step programs available to break addictions to cocaine, gambling, sexual promiscuity, extravagant shopping, and others have all arisen from Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in the 1930s. In turn, A.A. derived much of its basic philosophy from the Oxford Groups or the Moral Re-Armament Movement, a conservative Christian movement initiated in England in the early 1920s.¹¹⁵ The movement held that "God could become real to anyone who was willing to believe." Estrangement from God was caused by "moral compromise. People needed to examine their lives against the standards of absolute purity, unselfishness, and love." The movement "emphasized the need for sharing and guidance" and featured "confessions of one's sins and failures to another member of the group."¹¹⁶

A.A. and its offspring present "a nondenominational, nonpolitical approach to spirituality as the foundation for developing a positive self-image and arresting the illness that was manifesting itself in compulsive behaviors." The individual can "develop his or her own conception of a Higher Power" and initiate a "guided self-assessment so that major life changes can be made."¹¹⁷ Analysis of 12-step programs "clearly delineate the spiritual character of the movement." It contains the religious belief that human beings can transform their lives. The reliance on an "other power" reflects Christian beliefs, and the appeal to self-effort and self-improvement "goes back as far as the Puritans, for whom growth in personal character was a highly-prized goal."¹¹⁸

Joseph L. Price, in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, gathered numerous writers (none of them opposed to sports) to compare the worlds of athletics and religion. He found that the myths, symbols, rites and ceremonies common to religion are also present in sports and in the sports calendar, which presents a kind of liturgical year. Baptists in the South (as well as priests and ministers in Wisconsin) cut their sermons short so parishioners won't miss the kick-off. Catechism instruction regimens bow to practice schedules and tournament times. Preachers lace sermons with sports illustrations.¹¹⁹ In a similar vein, Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II, in *Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture*, pursued a similar linkage, though limiting themselves to baseball.¹²⁰

One practitioner of Wiccan spirituality explained that their movement was composed of women "dedicated to the concept of healing ourselves and Mother Earth" who "have an effect on our culture and the political scene." They believe "in the sanctity of Mother Earth" and profess to "consciously learn to work with the power of the Universe, empowering ourselves and one another. We know that in learning to tap into that power we will be able to help the Mother."¹²¹

Kwanzaa "was invented in the days of red-hot expressions of 'blackness' and anti-whiteness. It found its wedge in the years of hyper-multiculturalism." For a while African-Americans, like many others, "were told to become separate and stay insulated from others' celebrations and observances all around them." Such individual

¹¹³ Mary Ferrell Bednarowski, "Literature of the New Age: A Review of Representative Sources," *Religious Studies Review* 17 (July 1991): 216.

¹¹⁴ James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 160, 169.

¹¹⁵ Corbett, *Religion in America*, 285.

¹¹⁶ J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 3rd ed., (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1989), 964.

¹¹⁷ Sandra Sizer Frankiel, "California and the Southwest," in *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 1520.

¹¹⁸ Corbett, *Religion in America*, 287.

¹¹⁹ Joseph L. Price, *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000).

¹²⁰ Christopher Hodge Evans and William R. Herzog II, eds., *Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

¹²¹ "Women in Conscious Creative Action," www.wiccapwomen.com/herstory/html, November 27, 2002; cited by Shibley, "Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest," 146.

and individualistic traditions were seen to be a "rejection of all other traditions" and their celebrations "were to exclude all but their own kind." Today some of the militancy has gone out of Kwanzaa observances, and non-African Americans are less uneasy by their observance.¹²²

These and other spiritualities emphasize what Paul Tillich observed half a century ago, that religion is whatever is of "ultimate concern" to an individual.¹²³ Which is similar to the observation Martin Luther made in his *Large Catechism*: "That upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god."¹²⁴

American Jesus

Albert Schweitzer once remarked that "it has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character."¹²⁵ Jesus has been variously portrayed in Eastern Orthodox iconography, by the great Renaissance painters, in Reformation woodcuts, and in the folk art of the Appalachians.

In the unfolding of American history, Jesus has been seen as enlightened sage, as great moral teacher, as feminized friend yet as rustic tradesman, as Redeemer of many, and as Champion of the Poor. He was depicted as moral model in Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps* in 1896, from which we received the ubiquitous question, "What Would Jesus Do?"¹²⁶ He was portrayed in Bruce Barton's 1920s book *The Man Nobody Knows* as the greatest salesman the world had ever seen.¹²⁷

During the twentieth century, Jesus also received various interpretations on film, from Cecil B. De Mille's *The King of Kings*; to reverent treatment in Samuel Bronston's *King of Kings* and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* in the early 1960s; to Pier Paolo Pasolini's black-and-white neo-realistic *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* in 1966; to Norman Jewison's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* and David Greene's hippie-musical *Godspell* in the early 1970s; to Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, John Heyman's *Jesus*, Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*,¹²⁸ to Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* in 2004.

Two recent books, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, by Stephen Prothero, and *Jesus in America, A History: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession*, by Richard W. Fox,¹²⁹ detail how the question Jesus asked so long ago at Caesarea Philippi, "Who do people say I am?" receives increasingly bizarre and scripturally-disconnected answers. Jesus is featured in a 2002 advertisement promoting more economy- and ecology-minded vehicles with the question, "What would Jesus drive?"¹³⁰ Clifford Davis' painting *The Conformist* puts Warner Sallman's iconic *Head of Christ* atop a conservative business suit and gives Jesus a slicked-back short haircut to picture him as a buttoned-down C.E.O.¹³¹ Stephen Sawyer's *Undefeated* depicts the Son of God with Fabio-like hair, well-toned pecs and boxing gloves, rendering Jesus more masculine and Christianity more muscular.¹³² He is depicted alongside the American flag and a bald eagle above Washington D.C. and the Rushmore portraits of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, with the passage, "Blessed Is The Nation Whose God Is The Lord. Psalm 33:12."¹³³

Prothero notes that "the American Jesus is something of a chameleon." At various times he has been depicted as black and white, male and female, "straight and gay, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman and a civil rights agitator." But what is new today is that he is no longer regarded

¹²² Martin E. Marty, "Kwanzaa," *Sightings*, December 29, 2003; http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2003/1229.shtml.

¹²³ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), xv.

¹²⁴ Martin Luther, "The First Commandment," *The Large Catechism I*, 3; *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House): 581.

¹²⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 2.

¹²⁶ Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989 reprint).

¹²⁷ Bruce B. Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher: 2000).

¹²⁸ W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Poleridge Press, 1997).

¹²⁹ Richard W. Fox, *Jesus in America, A History: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (Harper San Francisco, 2004).

¹³⁰ Christine McCarthy McMorris, "What Would Jesus Drive?" *Religion in the News* 6 (Spring 2003)

<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/RINVOL6No1/What%20Would%20Jesus.htm>

¹³¹ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 180.

¹³² Stephen Sawyer, "Art for God"; <http://www.art4god.com/html/?go=product&id=un>.

¹³³ The Bible Place.Com; http://www.bibleplace.com/images/TShirts/P172-Blessed_Is_The_Nation.jpg

as "a Christian concern" but is appealed to by atheists, agnostics, Black Muslims and white Buddhists.¹³⁴ He is "ubiquitous in American pop culture." Mick Jagger and Bono sing about "looking for Buddha but finding Jesus." Jesus is "a fixture on the American landscape—on highway billboards, bumper stickers, and even tattooed bodies." He is seen in western states, flying around in purple robes and identified as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Near Disney World is a Jesus theme park called "The Holy Land Experience." A seven-story "Christ of the Ozarks" looms over Eureka Springs, Arkansas.¹³⁵

Prothero concluded that "for many Americans, Jesus is not a Christian at all." To be sure, his person and teachings are employed in various Christian venues. But the countenance of Jesus has also been used in an attempt to reform or subvert Christian tradition "both from within and without" by Americans who see him as non-denominational and non-Christian. Whether it was Thomas Jefferson's truncated Bible, containing only those bits of Jesus' moral philosophy that Jefferson approved of;¹³⁶ or Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, who tried to fashion Jesus as a Reform Jew in such books as *Moses and Jesus* (1892) and *Jesus of Nazareth from a Jewish Point of View* (1899);¹³⁷ or Swami Vivekananda, who in his appearance at the World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893 sought similarities between Jesus and Hinduism;¹³⁸ "all drew sharp distinctions between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus, and all used the former to attack the latter. While other Americans loved Jesus because of Christianity, they loved him despite it. The fact that the United States is a Jesus nation does not make it a Christian one."¹³⁹

The familiar words from C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* are very much in place:

I am here trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else He would be the Devil of Hell. You must take your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up as a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹⁴⁰

The Lutheran difference

Lutherans have been in the American mix almost from the beginning. Some of the earliest immigrants along the Atlantic coast and up the Delaware River valley in the early 1600s were Scandinavian Lutherans.

Today, America's 9 million or so Lutherans are concentrated in the upper Midwest, where they form a majority in North Dakota and southern Minnesota.¹⁴¹ To be more precise, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America finds its greatest concentration in northern North Dakota, along the Canadian border, and along the Minnesota-Iowa border, with strong representation throughout Minnesota and eastern portions of South Dakota and Nebraska.¹⁴² The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, despite the namesake state in its official title, exhibits greater representation in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Illinois, Wisconsin, and along the eastern shores of Saginaw Bay in Michigan's thumb, with additional significant presence in several counties of northern

¹³⁴ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 8-9.

¹³⁵ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 11-12.

¹³⁶ *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Beacon Press, 2001).

¹³⁷ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 239-42.

¹³⁸ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 267-77.

¹³⁹ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 301.

¹⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 55-56.

¹⁴¹ "Lutherans as a Percentage of all Residents, 2000," *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000*.

¹⁴² "ELCA Lutherans as a Percentage of all Residents, 2000," *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000*.

Oklahoma and central Texas.¹⁴³ The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, with more than 211,000 of its 400,000 members in the state of Wisconsin, also has concentrations of members through southern Minnesota, southern North Dakota, northern South Dakota, some counties in Nebraska, in the Saginaw area, on the eastern edge of Puget Sound in Washington State, and in east central Arizona.¹⁴⁴

DeAnn Lagerquist has remarked on the fact that Lutherans, probably for all their time in the New World, have gone noticeably unnoticed. "Lutherans who appear in the news are seldom identified as Lutherans," she wrote. Unlike Jews and Catholics, Lutherans have produced few fiction writers. "Authors seldom identify a character as Lutheran, perhaps because to do so seems to convey so little. Most often the definition suggests only vague inoffensive religiousness." In an unnamed novel Lagerquist cites in which many of the main characters are Lutheran, the conductor of a train filled with Lutherans traveling to a historic convention in Minneapolis observes: "Nobody could say that the Lutherans weren't nice." But, "once given credit for niceness," Lagerquist asked, "what more is there to say?"¹⁴⁵

Lutherans in Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegone "are nice enough: frugal, responsible, and wary of rapid change. They know who they are because they are mostly Norwegian (or their ancestors were)"—[we must add, of course, German]—"and because they are not Catholic. Beyond ethnicity and church membership, they have much in common with the Catholics"¹⁴⁶—which probably comes as no small surprise to those Lutherans who remember when their theology was defined chiefly by its antithesis to Catholicism and who recall how almost any change in liturgical practice, architectural style, or clergy garb could be stopped dead in its tracks with the accusation that it was "too Catholic."¹⁴⁷

Despite frequently targeting Lutherans for gentle teasing, Keillor seems to like them. Of course, he has said that serious Lutherans, "when they get together, talk about sin."¹⁴⁸ Again: "When given the option, Lutherans will always downsize."¹⁴⁹ One more: "A favorite sign outside a Lutheran Church announces the topic of that week's sermon as, 'It could be worse.'"¹⁵⁰

Yet Keillor has written that he admires Lutherans for being "ferocious truth-seekers and terribly intolerant of hypocrisy." Further, he notes that Lutheran kids "tend to be spared some of that rebelliousness and self-indulgence that society seems to expect of teenagers but that can be so destructive."¹⁵¹

With a bit less gentle humor but more food for thought—and closer to home—Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary President Paul Wendland asked in 2000, "Who are we in all of this?" He answered,

We're still pretty German. We like our structures and our institutions—our safe little enclaves where we can be surrounded by people just like us. We like it when things are buttoned down and under control, especially our own control. We're still fiercely independent; team ministry is not our strong suit. We like to be right. We rarely praise our Synod, or each other. We often criticize. We're not the flashiest bunch around. We really don't want to be. We abhor emotional displays. We like to set modest goals, and prefer incremental changes. We're not the easiest on outsiders, nor the most welcoming to folks whose ways are different. We prefer to hold ourselves aloof. Oh, but when you get to know us, there's not a better bunch

¹⁴³ "Missouri Synod Lutherans as a Percentage of all Residents, 2000," *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000*.

¹⁴⁴ "Wisconsin Synod Lutherans as a Percentage of all Residents, 2000," *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000*.

¹⁴⁵ Lagerquist, "What More Than Nice?" 83.

¹⁴⁶ Lagerquist, "What More Than Nice?" 83-84.

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, James Neuchterlein, "Some of My Best Friends," *First Things* 48 (December 1994): 7-8; "The Lutheran Prospect," *First Things* 86 (October 1998): 12-13

¹⁴⁸ Quoted by Neal Sadler, "Dinner with Jesus: Priceless," condensed version of a sermon delivered on Sunday, April 1, 2001, St. Matthew United Church of Christ, Wheaton, IL: <http://www.stmatthew->

¹⁴⁹ Matthew Rose, "Unremarkably Lutheran," *First Things* 110 (February 2001): 13.

¹⁵⁰ Cited by Robert Fulford, "Can Garrison Keillor make Lutherans funny?" *The National Post*, February 5, 2002; <http://www.robertfulford.com/fulford/GarrisonKeillor.html>, accessed September 27, 2002.

¹⁵¹ Todd Etshman, "Visiting Lake Wobegon: An interview with Garrison Keillor about that mythical Minnesota town and its Lutherans," *The Lutheran* 15 (February 2002): 22.

of people on earth. We're loyal, hard-working, honest, and devoted to our families. And did I mention? We're still not Missouri.¹⁵²

When one compares this characterization of the Wisconsin Synod with the two overarching trends Wendland says are facing us in the new millennium—"an increasing rate of change coupled with an accelerating fragmentation"—the conclusion, humanly speaking, is that "our Synodical nature seems singularly ill-suited to our current context."¹⁵³

Mark Noll, church historian and Evangelical, who recently moved from Wheaton College to Notre Dame University, and who generally likes what he knows about Lutherans, has said that to contribute as Lutherans in America, "Lutherans must remain authentically Lutheran." Anyone familiar with the historical tendency of American Lutherans to "round off the corners" of confessionally distinctive doctrines to become more like the Protestants and Evangelicals around them can appreciate Noll's first prescription. But he adds a second, which at very least brings some discomfort: "Second, to contribute as Lutherans in America, Lutherans must also find out how to speak Lutheran with an American accent."¹⁵⁴

It is perhaps best that one not from within our own tent reminds us of the unique insights Lutherans bring to an Arminian, Evangelical, postmodern, felt-needs religious environment:

Lutherans have always insisted that history is important to the faith. Go to an Evangelical book store, and the oldest titles in their "church history" section may go back no farther than G.K. Chesterton. "American Christians who proclaimed 'no creed but the Bible' gleefully joined the anti-historical chorus" so popular in America, Noll wrote. Evangelicals, who "waste away with panting for the supernatural quick fix," and liberals, who "want to fix things by themselves and right away," can both learn from Lutherans about "the long view of history," which offers insulation "against the instability of innovation and the overconfidence of ignorance." Lutherans operate with a sober sense of "how regular are the follies of humanity" and "how constant the grace of God."¹⁵⁵

Lutherans have an appreciation for the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Both the kingdom of the right hand—the church—and the kingdom of the left hand—the secular state—belong to God and are under His jurisdiction. Each has separate functions, and God works through each with differing tools. The power entrusted to the church is "a power to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the Sacraments," and it is exercised "only by teaching and preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments." On the other hand, "civil government deals with things other than does the Gospel." Civil rulers "defend not minds, but bodies" and "restrain men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice and peace." The powers of Church and government "must not be confounded." The Church should not "prescribe laws to civil rulers concerning the form of the Commonwealth."¹⁵⁶

By contrast, "the dominant pattern of political involvement in America has always been one of direct, aggressive action modeled on Reformed theories of life in the world," Noll remarked. Following our first examples from European Calvinists and English Puritans, Americans "have moved in a straight line from personal belief to social reform, from private experience to political activity." In more recent history, the Reformed strategy has been "wholehearted pursuit of political goals defined on the basis of private religious beliefs."¹⁵⁷ Lutheran two kingdom sensibilities steer a different course, neither expecting the government to reform society nor requiring the Church to rule it.

¹⁵² Paul O. Wendland, "Forward in Christ...At the Dawn of a New Millennium: Changing Contexts—Eternal Word," Reformation Symposium, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI, October 31, 2000, 16; <http://www.wlssays.net/node/894>.

¹⁵³ Wendland. "Forward in Christ," 16.

¹⁵⁴ Mark A. Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," *First Things* 20 (February 1992): 37.

¹⁵⁵ Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," 36-37.

¹⁵⁶ "Of Ecclesiastical Power," The Augsburg Confession, XVIII, 5, 8, 11, 12; *Triglot Concordia*, 85.

¹⁵⁷ Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," 37.

Lutherans enjoy a noble theological tradition in form and content. "It has been rare for carefully constructed theology to flourish in America," Noll wrote. Christian conviction has seldom been matched by well-conceived and deliberated statements of faith. The Lutheran Confessional statements "present a cohesive picture of the Christian's relationship to God, to fellow humans, and to the world."

That cohesive picture can stand at great odds over against most of American religious thinking. The Revolutionary period placed great confidence in human ability to chart a political destiny. The Enlightenment placed similar great confidence in people's ability to ascertain human motivation. Protestant revivalists placed their own great confidence in the human mind to discern God's will. But Lutheranism's Augustinian concept of human nature—man forever curved in on himself—offers a more realistic, more reliable explanation of the world we live in.¹⁵⁸

Combined with an all-encompassing sense of human sinfulness is the Lutheran understanding of the objectivity and universality of God's grace in Christ. Protestants have tended to interpret preaching, Bible reading, and the Sacraments (more often understood as ordinances) as "occasions for human acts of appropriation." Protestant revivalism focused chief concern on the moment and experience of conversion. "That *God* saves in baptism," Noll wrote, "that *God* gives himself in the Supper, that *God* announces his Word through the sermon, that *God* is the best interpreter of his written Word," are contributions Lutherans can uniquely make.¹⁵⁹

Lutherans can offer Americans the voice of Luther. Such as this:

He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people the apostle calls "enemies of the cross of Christ," for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.¹⁶⁰

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won [delivered] me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, in order that I may be [wholly] His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.¹⁶¹

Although I am a sinner according to the Law, judged by the righteousness of the Law, nevertheless I do not despair. I do not die, because Christ lives who is my eternal and heavenly life. In that righteousness and life I have no sin, conscience, and death. I am indeed a sinner according to the present life and its righteousness, as a son of Adam where the Law accuses me, death reigns and devours me. But above this life I have another righteousness, another life, which is Christ, the Son of God, who does not know sin and death but is righteousness and eternal life. For His sake this body of mine will be raised from the dead and delivered from the slavery of the Law and will be sanctified together with the spirit.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," 38-39.

¹⁵⁹ Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," 39.

¹⁶⁰ Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation, 1518," Thesis 21, trans. Harold J. Grimm, *Luther's Works* 31, ed., Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 53.

¹⁶¹ Martin Luther, "The Second Article," *The Small Catechism* II, 4; *Triglot Concordia*, 545.

¹⁶² Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4," trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works* 26, ed., Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hanson (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 9.

We are beggars, this is true.¹⁶³

Americans need to hear these words, Noll concluded, not only in church but "in the universities, in the boardrooms of corporations, in the halls of Congress, in the military, in homes and schools and shopping malls and on athletic fields and the factory floor." They need to be heard wherever "the restless hearts of men and women search for meaning, forgiveness, truth, and the hope of life." They are not just for Lutherans, but "for Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants," and "for all those who do not recognize their need of God."¹⁶⁴ They may be said by other people in other places, but they must first be said here and now by us.

¹⁶³ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 324.

¹⁶⁴ Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," 40