

The Blockbuster Story and Cultural Status of Christianity in the United States

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*American Christianity is important for the world primarily because
the world is coming more and more to look like America.*
– Mark Noll

The face of American Christianity is in transition.
– James K. Wellman

I. Historical Constructs: The Good Ground

In his parable of the sower, Jesus engaged remarkably earthy language to illustrate the dynamics of evangelism and salvation. This metaphor, of course, has multiple levels of meaning and multiple applications covering countries as well as human beings. Not strictly a taxonomy of soils, the parable translates into a classification of peoples and countries in relation to the Christianity. In the *first* category is the rocky soil that is hard for roots or water to penetrate. This historically would include countries like India, China, Japan, and Thailand where Christianity has made little headway (however China has been much more receptive within the last couple of generations) and where still billions live outside of the pale of the kingdom. In the *second* category is the soil in which the seed strikes roots but is eventually choked by thorns and thistles. This could represent countries in the Middle East, the original

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homeland of the faith, where Christianity was firmly established in the early centuries but was eventually choked by the forces of the Enemy. In the *third* category is the “good ground” that brings forth a great harvest, some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some a hundredfold. The United States is just but one of the countries that make up the last category.¹

And while considerably less religious than the 1980s, even secular pundits concede the United States today is one of the most Christian countries in the world. One of the features of the United States is its diverse expressions of Christianity, and that this diversity makes it distinctive among the other nations of the world. Likewise, competing understandings of the national mission are wrapped up in various understandings of the Christian faith. Not that Christians in the United States are less materialistic than their European counterparts; simply that their materialism is sublated and tempered by an acknowledgment of the role of the divine in human affairs and by a strong identification with the values of the Christian faith. It would, however, be unbiblical to extrapolate from this that the United States is in any way an exceptional nation or a promised land, as some claim. In the NT, unlike in the OT, God deals primarily with individual believers and has no ethnic, genealogical, family or group compact.²

The story of Christianity in the United States—and the manifestation of the main tributaries of Christianity: Protestant, Anglican/Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Orthodox—has unfolded in somewhat discernible epochs. The Spanish and French brought Roman Catholicism to the colonies, while British and Germans introduced Protestantism. Among Protestants, adherents to Anglicanism, the Baptist Church, Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, Quakerism, Mennonite and Moravian Church were the first to settle in the colonies. The Russians and other central and eastern Europeans pioneered the Orthodox Church.

Beginnings: 1492–1700

Christianity was transplanted in the New World during a period when political turmoil and religious ferment was dramatically changing the map of Europe. The once monolithic Roman Catholic Church had been challenged and fractured by dissenters who changed the language and institutions of faith. Islam was no longer a military threat, although Constantinople, the heart of Byzantine Christianity, had been conquered by the Turks in 1453, thus completing Muslim conquest of all the Mediterranean lands, which was once the fertile homeland of the Church. The New World, opened by the Catholic Christopher Columbus in 1492, tripled the size of physical Christendom by adding two new continents.

The first Christian settlement in North America was that of the French Huguenots under Admiral Gaspard de Coligny II, who in 1564 founded a colony called Fort Caroline on the

¹We acknowledge this may be a novel way of reading the parable. Jesus had something in mind when he spoke it to his listeners and it certainly was not China, India, Thailand and the United States. However, he was speaking of different responses to the gospel. While individual responses are normally ascribed to this soil metaphor, we apply it albeit tentatively in a national sense. For centuries, it is true, China has insulated itself against the outside world but today the gospel is finding much good soil in, for example, China, among many countries, along with the stony. Certainly, numbers are hard to come by, but today there are somewhere between 60 and 100 million believers in China. Thanks to David Wells for pointing this out.

²Of course, Paul’s letters are largely addressed to communities trying to figure out how to navigate life together and in the Gospels, we also see families and friendship units in the Gospels, yet the primary motif is with individuals.

mouth of St. John's River in Florida.³ They celebrated the first Thanksgiving on June 30 of that year. The Spanish followed with a permanent settlement in St. Augustine on August 28, 1565. From this colony the Spanish established satellite colonies and missions throughout the Southwest and as far north as the Carolinas. Meanwhile, the French moved from their original settlements in Lawrence River Valley of Canada through the Great Lakes region down the Mississippi River to Louisiana. The first permanent English settlement was at Jamestown in 1607 and was noted for its religious zeal.⁴ Before their departure from England the minister William Symonds preached from Genesis 12:1–3 comparing their impending journey to that of Abraham and their new homeland to Canaan.

From the beginning, the Church of England was established as the official religion of Virginia, the largest colony. In fact by 1624, the bishop of London made it a favorite missionary target and sent in 22 clergymen. In practice, “establishment” meant that local taxes were funneled through the local parish to handle the needs of local government.

The New England colonies were different because both the Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth in 1620 and the Puritans who settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 were dissenters and brought with them beliefs that were at odds with the established church. One must be circumspect not to conflate the distinctions (even radically so) of the Pilgrims and Puritans in the New World, the Mayflower Compact did serve as a rallying document.⁵ It acknowledged God as the basis of all civil and religious authority and embodied their hope of establishing a model Christian community, a “city upon a hill” that would be a light to the nations. After finding himself in conflict with the other New Englanders, in 1636 Roger Williams founded the colony of Rhode Island and it eventually became a stronghold for Baptists, Quakers and other nonconformists. Other Puritan colonies were established in Saybrook (1635, then merged with Connecticut in 1644), Connecticut (1636), New Haven (1638, then merged with Connecticut in 1665), followed by Plymouth, who became part of Massachusetts Bay in 1691. The two northernmost Massachusetts Colonies broke off to form New Hampshire (1679).

Later colonies were formed around a denominational nucleus. For example, the Dutch founded the colony of New Netherland (later New Amsterdam) in 1624, a trading *entrepôt* for the Dutch West India Company. The Dutch Reformed Church emerged naturally from in this ethnic conclave. When the English captured New Amsterdam it was renamed New York.

³Some historians say 1562 instead; others debate the success of its establishment. Of course, this is not the standard account of when Thanksgiving began rather than in Plymouth in 1621. For further information on this alternate account of Thanksgiving, see B. B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics & Huguenots in Sixteenth Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford, 1991); J. Shimizu, *Conflict of Loyalties: Politics and Religion in the Career of Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France, 1519-1572* (Geneve, Switzerland: Librairie Droz, 1970).

⁴Some scholars would contest this notion and argue Jamestown was more of about economic gain and was known in its early years especially as being lawless. Thanks to Heather Vacek for pointing this out. And, as Shelby Balik argues, Jamestown may not have been as “religious” in the way that the New England colonies were. In early Jamestown, the church was used mainly as a means to keep an unruly population in line.

⁵It should be noted the Mayflower Compact (which applied only to Plymouth) and John Winthrop's “A Modell of Christian Charity,” which applied to the Puritans, did not carry the same legal weight (it was not a signed agreement, like the Mayflower Compact). The thrust of Winthrop's piece was not so much that Massachusetts Bay would be a model to other nations, but rather that they would leave behind other nations and live a bit closer to God than the people back in Europe.

The Swedes founded Protestant-leaning Fort Christiana in present-day Delaware in 1638.

Roman Catholicism arrived in the earliest days of the European colonization of the Americas as well. At the time the country was founded, only a small fraction of the population was Catholic (mostly in Maryland, although Rhode Island and Pennsylvania were friendly to Catholics as well). Driven by the sacred duty of finding a refuge for his Roman Catholic brethren, George Calvert obtained a charter from Charles I in 1632 for the territory between Pennsylvania and Virginia. This “Maryland charter” offered no guidelines on religion, although it was assumed that Catholics would find a hospitable environment in the new colony. In 1634, Calvert’s son, Lord Baltimore dispatched two of his ships, the *Ark* and the *Dove*, with the first 200 settlers to Maryland. They included two Catholic priests. Lord Baltimore inherited the grant for Maryland from his father. He assumed that religion was a private matter and rejected the need for an established church, guaranteed liberty of conscience to all Christians, and embraced pluralism.⁶

Meanwhile, William Penn founded the colony of Pennsylvania as a haven for Quakers and other religious minorities. Described as a “Holy Experiment” it attracted not only Quakers but also Amish, Mennonites, and Moravians.

By 1700 the religious map of Colonial America was more or less complete and it represented all the major confessions.⁷ All colonies had to live under the English Toleration Act of 1689, but a degree of practical liberty was universal if not inconsistently applied as of 1700. The colonies were noted for their emphasis on biblical Christianity, religious liberty (perhaps with the possible exception in some instances in Massachusetts, and specifically the Quakers), and a strong work ethic.⁸ These characteristics in some measure still define Christianity in the United States.

Regression to the Mean: 1700–1725

Sociologists often speak of regression to the mean as a falling away in enthusiasm and fervor after an initial spurt of fever-pitch frenzy as often happens in times of great social or religious change. This phenomenon confronted the Puritans in New England where conversion was closely tied to church membership and church membership to civil participation. Most of the second- and third-generation Puritans lacked the commitment to the faith that had sustained their forebearers. In an attempt to salvage the commonwealth the Puritan synod produced the Half-Way Covenant of 1662 which permitted the unconverted to join the church.⁹ (This

⁶Due to space limitations, we acknowledge not addressing other events, such as a virtual civil war in Maryland between Anglicans and Catholics, the Toleration Act of 1649, and the Glorious Revolution (as it played out in Maryland), which cemented Anglican power. Catholics still had liberty of conscience (technically) in Maryland, but they had to practice secretly, usually at private altars in their homes. Maryland was not a haven for religious liberty; in fact, along with Virginia and South Carolina, it became one of the strongest (and least tolerant) Anglican strongholds.

⁷Of course, as Shelby Balik reminds us, the significant wave of immigration in the eighteenth century, which included Scots-Irish Presbyterians, Scottish Catholics, Jews, and German Lutherans and Pietists, would significantly change the religious landscape of every region but New England, especially in the rapidly growing backcountry. Admittedly, religious and ethnic diversity in British North America was even far greater nuanced after 1700.

⁸We would be remiss if we did acknowledge the question of slavery. This was so central to American history (and the churches so compromised by it, both north and south). While we cannot spend the space it deserves here, there are several very fine entries about this important topic.

⁹A favorite and compelling description of this is found in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious*

decline was later chronicled by Cotton Mather in his *The Glory Departing from New England* [1702]). It was designed as a compromise but it made it impossible to maintain doctrinal purity. Other colonies faced similar problems and there was a growing indifference to religion. The quality of the clergy itself had declined and they were not enough to serve the colonies outside New England. Further, rationalism was raging and many were concerned the clergy were too rational and not emotional enough (although this may have as much to do with the mood of the clergy not matching the mood of the people and not necessarily the quality of the clergy in an objective sense. While rationalism was gaining a foothold in the colleges, as of 1700, Harvard was still unquestionably Puritan; William and Mary was still Anglican (having just been founded in 1693); Yale (1701) was Puritan/Congregationalist.

“Refreshings” and First Great Awakening: 1725–1775

Beginning in 1725 and ending around 1775 a series of revivals helped to turn the decline.¹⁰ Precursors of the revivals proper laid the groundwork, namely that of Samuel Stoddard and his “refreshings” in the early eighteenth century. Then came stirrings in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey mostly due to the preaching of Guiliam Bertholf and T. J. Frelinghuysen. The revival soon spread further within the Middle Colonies, then north to New England and south to Georgia helped by the fiery preaching of George Whitefield, a contemporary of John Wesley. In New England, the revivals were spearheaded by Jonathan Edwards who also charted their course with his books, such as *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742) and exploring religious experience with his *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). William and Gilbert Tennant were also influential; especially the latter’s *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* (1740).

Although divisive in some places, the revivals helped to make evangelicalism the norm in American Christian experience. The new religious mindset was characterized by heightened emotionalism; a more dramatic style of preaching and exhortation; and a vigorous post-millennialism—an optimistic, even triumphalistic, mind-set that viewed the forces of Satan gradually being defeated by the expansion of the kingdom of God from these revivals ushering in the second coming of Christ.

Of course, the mainline denominations (a twentieth century label) had been well established and were endemic to the fabric of Christianity in United States.¹¹ The largest US mainline churches—later called by William Hutchison the “seven sisters of American Protestantism” (United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), American Baptist Churches (USA), United Church of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—were a majority of all Protestants in the United States until the mid-twentieth century.

History of the American People, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale, 1965); see esp. ch. 10: “Tensions in the New England Way.” Of course, as Peggy Bendroth reminds, it is hard for us in the present to know exactly what was going on in people’s hearts long ago.

¹⁰The Great Awakening is generally defined more narrowly—usually 1730s-early 1740s. There were revivals before and after that, but it’s usually the Edwardsian-Whitefieldian revivals that define the Awakening. While Whitefield’s and Wesley’s mission to Georgia was generally considered a failure, it was Whitefield’s later visit to Pennsylvania that triggered the Awakening in the mid-Atlantic and then spread north and south of there.

¹¹ For further tracing of the history of this term, see Elesha Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford, 2013).

American Revolutionary Period: 1775–1800

The American Revolution that created the United States is a watershed in political as well as religious history—a blend of biblical and republican ideals. That interlocking relationship has survived to this day and allowed religious and political freedoms to flourish together. While often claimed the Founding Fathers were Christian, historical records prove more complicated. The major architects of the new nation, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and James Madison evinced Deist sympathies, as did George Washington, who was never outwardly religious, but never formally abandoned the Anglican/Episcopal church. The founding documents do mention God but only in a generic sense and they make no reference to Christ or Christianity. The Constitution itself not only disestablished the church but ultimately created a wall of separation between the two.¹²

Although Jefferson, in his 1786 Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, and Madison, author of the separation of church and state clause, designed them to curtail the influence of the former, it eventually turned out to be a blessing. The correspondence between Jefferson and the Connecticut Baptists indicates Jefferson did not want the state interfering in religious disputes. Christianity was no longer simply a handmaiden of the state, but a force in national life independent of any other sector and it could now serve as the conscience and moral compass without the imprimatur of the state. In other words, the Constitution created a secular government, but most people expected that the United States would hang on to its Christian culture and character.

Nevertheless the closing years of the eighteenth century witnessed a sharp decline in the religious character of the new nation. (This was not universally true: during this time the Methodist church grew at an incredible rate, as did the Baptists.) On the one hand, religious observance was at a low nationwide, partly because mobility and western expansion impeded church attendance, and partly because most people assumed “church members” were people who had joined a church in full communion. The percentage of church members (defined as such) might have been somewhere around 10-30% (this varied from place to place), the number of believers a bit higher, and the number of churchgoers who were not full church members somewhat higher than that.

As earlier noted, the major colleges openly espoused the new rationalism and apathy to Christianity. In 1795, Timothy Dwight, president of Yale, found only two young men in the entire student body of 110 who believed in God. The opening of the Western frontier further weakened traditional faith-based institutions and most frontier settlements lacked trained ministers. A 1790 survey found that only 5% of the American people had any denominational ties or knowledge of the Christian faith.

During this time, the historic Orthodox Church emerged, beginning in Russian Alaska in 1794 (although not yet part of the United States). Orthodox Christianity—distinct from

¹²This phrase “wall of separation” was one Jefferson used in a letter to the Danbury Baptists; it does not appear in the Constitution or the first amendment. We do not mean to offer the sense that it appears it does, yet this was to become the resultant effect. For more see, John Fea’s *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011). It should be further noted that while the Constitution prohibited the federal government from passing any law that supported a particular religion, it did not apply to the states until after the Civil War, when the due process and equal protection clauses in the 14th amendment applied federal civil rights protections to the states. Many states had some form of establishment long after the ratification of the Constitution.

Protestantism and Roman Catholicism—would become a very unique contributor to Christianity in the United States, especially in the areas of theology, worship, iconography, and ecumenism.¹³ Its American expressions have had a profound effect on Christian theological and historical traditions.

Second Great Awakening: 1800–1861

The tide turned in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ A great wave of spiritual revivals known as awakenings swept the country. Preachers like Timothy Dwight stoked the fires of evangelicalism in New England while a new form of preaching stirred the western frontier. Central to this revival was the camp meeting, a phenomenon unique to American Christianity. Camp meetings, though not formulaic from the outset, became week-long outdoor meetings. The early revivals began in Kentucky under James McGready. Shortly thereafter Barton W. Stone, who had been converted by McGready, carried the revival to Cane Ridge, Kentucky, where his meetings were attended by 25,000 people and lasted for six days and nights.

Cane Ridge started out as a Presbyterian communion season that McGready opened up to other denominations like the Methodists. Methodists borrowed the format and called it the camp meeting and made it part of their practice. Camp meetings often featured lay preaching (including by blacks and women) and were typically ecumenical gatherings, though they were organized by Methodists. Other denominations also adopted the format of open-invitation, ecumenical revivalist gatherings that encouraged lay preaching and were intended to spark conversion.

About thirty years later, Charles G. Finney began his revival meetings in New York. While his revival in Rochester started in 1830, Finney had been preaching in the Burned-Over District since the mid-1820s. His interdenominational campaigns (the term crusade had not yet come into use) were noted for their “new measures” including participation of women in services. In urban settings, prayer meetings, especially of professionals, became more common; some were held in theaters. One preacher who played a key role in prayer meeting revivals was Phoebe Palmer. By the time of the Civil War evangelicalism had become the core of American Christianity and it inaugurated a new golden age in the spread of the Gospel. Christianity had become part of the national identity. The religious center of the nation shifted from the eastern seaboard to the trans-Appalachian frontier.

Congregationalist gained numbers, kept pace with new church-founding, and remained dominant in New England. They also had a significant missionary presence in the Ohio Valley. Episcopalians lost much of their influence to the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, helped by a large influx of new African American converts. Revivals birthed new denominations, such as the Disciples of Christ and the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The period also witnessed the growth of the Roman Catholic Church which had maintained a low profile during the early years of the republic. Germans, Italians, and Poles made their way to a hopeful new land. Millions of Irish Catholics migrated to the United States in the wake of the potato famine of the 1840s. The Louisiana Purchase added thousands of Catholics of French descent. Also, the annexation of Texas and the acquisition

¹³For a fine description of its story, see Thomas FitzGerald, *The Orthodox Church* (Westport, CT: Greenwood/Praeger, 1998).

¹⁴We acknowledge the dates for the Second Great Awakening are not well-defined and some scholars put the end-point in the 1830s or 1840s. Revivalism continued, of course, after the Awakening peaked.

of territory after the Mexican American War added thousands of Mexican Catholics.

By 1860 Roman Catholicism had become the largest single Christian denomination. And as a result of expansion and immigration over the country's history, the number of adherents has grown dramatically and is the largest profession of faith in the United States today. In fact, Catholic membership and attendance in the U.S. have not declined as much as some of the mainline denominations because of the infusion of Latino Catholics.¹⁵ With over 67 million registered residents professing the faith in 2008, the United States has the fourth largest Catholic population in the world after Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines, respectively.

The Awakening had collateral political and social significance, as it intensified the abolitionist movement and inspired crusades for women's rights and temperance. Perfectionism, a doctrine that came out of the Second Great Awakening, also had political implications for benevolence. Scores of voluntary faith-based organizations sprung in every state dedicated to evangelicalism, foreign missions, and Bible-based education. More than 150 Christian colleges were founded during this time. Christian reformers like William Lloyd Garrison, and Arthur and Lewis Tappan (and later, in the 19th century, William Jennings Bryan, Frances Willard) achieved national prominence. As such, antebellum benevolence movements created a precedent for evangelical reform that would become a hallmark of American religious culture. Yet, certainly not every Christian (and not even every evangelical) was in favor of reform.

Civil War and Second Decline: 1861–1877

The unrest during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath represented the second trough in American religious history. While denominations had split before the war over slavery and other issues, groups became further fractured with partisan politics and political corruption making Christianity become less relevant in national life. Dubbed "the gilded age" by Mark Twain in *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), in which he satirized an era of serious social problems masked by thin gold gilding. While an era of rapid economic growth, especially in the North and West, it also an era of poverty as very poor European immigrants poured in and children and women worked excessive hours. This was perhaps the period that witnessed the lowest point in nineteenth century religious history, as Darwinism became a fashionable alternative for the some intellectuals. Certainly many struggled hard with these kinds of issues and had honest doubts and questions; and for some, Darwinism did not *ipso facto* preclude faith in Christianity.

Return to Evangelicalism: 1877–1900

The decline was arrested by a new movement led by Dwight Moody, the most prominent evangelist to emerge during the waning years of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Moody introduced an evangelistic mode of preaching combined with music and worship that proved effective and helped to establish Protestantism as the dominant force in the religious landscape and the anchor of people's hopes and aspirations. Other factors, including, but not limited to, Darbyite dispensationalism, the rise of pre-millennialism, the thinking of Charles Hodge/

¹⁵We are grateful to David Bromley for making this important point.

¹⁶Jim Wellman reminds us that Evangelicals were on opposite sides of the Civil War and on the topic of slavery. And, some would argue that Moody was a mixed blessing: seeding the fundamentalism of the 20th century, which early on in the 20th ripped apart American Christianity, a wound that has never been resolved.

Benjamin Warfield/the Princeton Doctrine, and the backlash against modernism/liberal Christianity spurred the evolution of Fundamentalism in the 1880s.

It was at this time that the political establishment began to realize that they needed the votes of the Christians and therefore had to embrace Christian values in order to do so. The Puritan dream of a City on a Hill now morphed into the American Dream in which the nation's material prosperity was somehow tied to acceptance of Christian ethics. The Gospel of Wealth transported a remarkable expression of this connection between Christianity and the American Dream and represented a new danger to orthodoxy. To counter this trend, the churches turned to social and relief missions like the Salvation Army on the one hand and the Social Gospel movement on the other. The latter espoused the moral renovation of society and formulated it as being about 'deeds, not creeds' and 'life, not doctrine.' For some, Christian ethics and morals overshadowed the doctrinal foundations of the faith.

The Church Resurgent: 20th Century

Meanwhile fresh streams of immigrants of all nationalities changed the nature of Christian demographics. Catholicism was the first to confront the problem of indigenizing Christian institutions. Immigrant cultures tended to be isolated cultures divorced from the mainline denominations, thus creating challenges to assimilation.¹⁷ Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Russians brought Eastern Orthodoxy, diversifying what was until then a solidly Anglo-Saxon Protestant Establishment.

In the first decade of the twentieth century an event took place on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California that would have enormous impact on the development of Christianity in the United States: a one-eyed and illiterate preacher, William Seymour along with Charles Parham started the conflagration known as Pentecostalism that would sweep the world within the next century. Pentecostalism brought back traditions that had been lost since the times of second century figure Montanus, such as speaking in tongues, faith healings, words of knowledge, and divine prophecy. It also introduced new forms of exuberant worship and music. Pentecostalism, which drew from the evangelical/holiness movement, remains an important, if not provocative, contribution that Christianity in the United States has made to the global church.¹⁸

As the nation grew more diverse, some believers found it important to define orthodoxy and defend it from various forms of heresy as well as modernism and secularism. The churches were now divided into those who espoused liberalism and the new emerging theology against historical orthodoxy, now termed Fundamentalism. Their lists of doctrinal beliefs were those of historic Christianity. But Fundamentalism, as Marsden has recounted, held views, along with those beliefs that were culturally driven. He described fundamentalists as Evangelicals that were angry about something.¹⁹ Similarly, E.J. Carnell claimed fundamentalism was orthodoxy "gone cultic."

The debate became soon a battle for the soul of America, as the Fundamentalists expanded their campaigns to fields other than religion, including politics, women's rights, education, arts and the movies, and science. Initially liberal Protestants prevailed in public

¹⁷Although not all immigrant groups wanted to assimilate, some fought hard to retain their identity and uniqueness in a new land.

¹⁸A good summary of this can be found in the Introduction to Grant Wacker's *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003).

¹⁹From his *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990)

perception with the help of the media and the Unitarian strongholds in the East. Harry Emerson Fosdick and others had the effect of, in the minds of some, reducing Christianity to harmless pabulum while John Dewey helped liberals capture the schools and colleges with his educational theories.

What helped turn the tide was the emergence of neo-orthodoxy in the late 1920s and 1930s which sought to recover the ideas of the Reformation. The liberalizing movement began in Europe under Emil Brunner and Karl Barth and was championed in the United States by the brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s added millions of African Americans to the ranks of Christian activists who combined a concern for social and racial justice with a profound loyalty to traditional moral and family values. The social upheaval of the 1960s led to the rejection of the liberal consensus which had seemed to dominate American thought since the 1920s. Some would characterize that the liberals continued to win small battles in the courts and schools, but the war has been effectively won by the Evangelicals. Others would not support this conclusion and may want instead to nuance the growth and decline of these traditions numerically and assert other factors altogether. Certainly data from Daniel K. Williams's *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford University Press, 2012) might be useful in reframing the changing religious right/religious left dynamic in the twentieth century.

The twentieth century also witnessed the rise of new forms of media and communications like radio, television, and the Internet whose multiplier effect enabled emerging evangelicals to reach new audiences numbering in the millions that could not be reached by the conventional means of print and mass crusades. Crusades continued to remain a powerful tool in evangelism and twentieth century produced one of its greatest exponents in Billy Graham.²⁰ Graham became a household name throughout the world. The Charismatic movement has also affected the Catholic Church and promoted activism in evangelism and a greater attendance at Mass. In the early twenty-first century, the United States is the home of 900 Christian denominations and groups and over 1500 ministries and parachurch groups.

II. Sociological Constructs: Which Christianity?

In 1924, 91% of Americans believed that Christianity was the only true religion; today, only 41% do.²¹ Why this precipitous diminution? Numerous socio-cultural analyses, of course,

²⁰For more on the rise of Graham's prominence, see the Introduction to Grant Wacker *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014).

²¹Mark Chaves, *American Religion Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton, 2011). Decline in Christian belief is a prominent backdrop of culture in the United States. Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York: Penguin, 2014) describes five socio-cultural reasons for this increasing unbelief:

1. *Backlash to the presence of the religious right*. Beginning in the 1980s, with the rise of such groups as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, the closeness of conservative Republicanism with evangelical Christianity has been increasingly tight. With an emphasis on seeking to make abortion illegal, fighting against gay rights (particularly gay marriage), supporting prayer in schools, advocating "abstinence only" sex education, opposing stem cell research, curtailing welfare spending, supporting Israel, opposing gun control, and celebrating the war on terrorism, conservative Christians have found a warm welcome within the Republican Party. What this has done is alienate a lot of left-

leaning or politically moderate Americans from Christianity. Sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer have published compelling research indicating that much of the growth of “nones” in America is largely attributable to a reaction against this overt mixing of Christianity and conservative politics.

2. *Devastation of, and reaction against, the Catholic Church’s pedophile priest scandal.* For decades the higher-ups in the Catholic Church were reassigning known sexual predators to remote parishes rather than having them prosecuted. Those men in authority thus engaged in willful cover-ups and the aggressive slandering of accusers—and all with impunity. The extent of this criminality is hard to exaggerate: over six thousand priests (as of 2014) have been implicated in some form of sex abuse, five hundred have been jailed, and more victims have been made known than one can imagine. The result has been clear: a lot of Catholics have become ex-Catholics. Consider the situation in New England: Between 2000 and 2010, the Catholic Church lost 28 percent of its members in New Hampshire and 33 percent of its members in Maine, and closed nearly seventy parishes—a quarter of the total number—throughout the Boston area. In 1990, 54 percent of Massachusetts residents identified as Catholic, but it was down to 39 percent in 2008.

3. *Dramatic increase of women in the paid labor force.* British historian Callum Brown was the first to recognize this interesting correlation: when more and more women work outside the home, their religious involvement—as well as that of their families—tends to diminish. Brown rightly argues that it has been women who have historically kept their children and husbands interested and involved in religion. Then, starting in the 1960s, when more and more British women starting earning an income through work outside the home, their interest in—or time and energy for—religious involvement waned. And as women grew less religious, their husbands and children followed suit. A similar pattern exists in other European nations, especially in Scandinavia: Denmark and Sweden have the lowest levels of church attendance in the world, and simultaneously, Danish and Swedish women have among the highest rates of outside-the-home employment of any women in the world. And the data shows a similar trajectory here in America. Back in the 1960s, only 11 percent of American households relied on a mother as their biggest or sole source of income. Today, more than 40 percent of American families are in such a situation. Thus it may very well be that as a significantly higher percentage of American moms earn a living in the paid labor force, their enthusiasm for and engagement with religion is being sapped, and that is playing a role in the broader secularization of our country.

4. *Greater acceptance of homosexuality in American culture.* More and more Americans have come to accept homosexuality as a normal, legitimate form of love and pairing. For many, acceptance of homosexuals simply boils down to a matter of fairness, civil rights, and equality before the law. Those Americans who continue to malign homosexuality as sinful or immoral, and who continue to fight against gay rights, do so *exclusively* from a religious vantage point. And it is turning some people off religion. Zuckerman found, in *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, which was based on in-depth interviews with Americans who were once religious but are no longer, that many of those who have walked away from their religion in recent years have done so as a direct consequence of and reaction against their respective religious tradition’s continued condemnation and stigmatization of gays and lesbians. The fact that Americans between the ages of eighteen and thirty are the generation most accepting of homosexuality in the nation’s history, and are simultaneously those least interested in being religious—and the fact that the states that have legalized gay marriage tend to be among the most secular—might be coincidental, but seems unlikely.

5. *Ubiquity of the Internet.* The Internet has had a secularizing effect on society in recent decades. First, religious people can look up their own religion on the Web and are exposed to an array of critiques or blatant attacks on their tradition that they otherwise would never have come across. For example, in her ongoing research on nonbelieving clergy, Linda LaScola has found that many pastors who have lost their faith in God cite their time spent on the Internet as a factor in their emergent atheism. Second, the Internet allows people who may be privately harboring doubts about their religion to immediately connect with others who also share such doubts. Nascent atheists, skeptics, humanists, agnostics—even those in the most remote or fundamentalist of communities—can reach out to others

have researched this attenuation. A reasonable person might wonder *which* version of Christianity has been spurned. This stark reality makes us ponder to what extent has Christianity advanced and retarded life in the United States? Conversely, to what extent has life in the United States advanced or impeded Christianity?

Preoccupying Versions of Christianity

Christianity exists in its purest form with no adjectives. Yet the task of precisely describing a vast entity composed of millions of individuals is a risky proposition. But there has long been a fight for defining and describing the message, values, and practices of properly-interpreted Christian credence. Whoever has spoken loudest or with the most impassioned voice has been afforded with the most bounteous followings resulting in greater cultural influence.

Some have gained such a hearing within the traditional bounds of orthodox Christianity; others, and more notably in the United States than any other corner of the world, have conceived of and launched inventive nuances of the Christian message that flirt with and extend beyond historically orthodox thresholds. Robert McElvaine²² refers to the purveyors this latter drift and bombasts the “snakes who have hijacked the name of Christianity, perpetuated identify theft against Jesus, subverted his teachings, transformed his name into a representation of just the opposite of what he stands for, mocked and damned those how advocate what he actually said.” Is this the reason Americans have come to a less than hospitable stance toward Christianity over the last eighty years—faulty, misinterpreted information and values?

The question that beguiles scholars and laypeople alike is: *which Christianity* or which *version* of the Christian religion is to be acknowledged? For example, some teach an “easy Jesus creed” that passes for Christianity in wide swaths of the United States. Its basic contention: “*Accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and you can do whatever the hell you want.*”²³ And while their contexts did not use this language, this analogous ailment riled both Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)²⁴ (inflamed by a “state Christianity” in which *everyone* was a Christian) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)²⁵ (criticizing “cheap grace”) in their

online, instantly finding comfort and information, which encourages or strengthens their secularity. Third, and perhaps most subtle, the Web may be partly responsible for the rise of irreligion simply by what it is, what it can do, what it can provide, how it functions, and how it interfaces with us and our minds and our desires and our lives. The Internet may be supplying something psychological, or feeding something neurological, or establishing something cultural via its individual-computer-screen nexus, something dynamic that is edging out religion, replacing religion, or weakening religion.

²²In *Grand Theft Jesus: The Hijacking of Religion in America* (New York: Crown, 2008), 1.

²³*Ibid.*, 2. This reckless sentiment is certainly not what St. Augustine intended when he provocatively wrote: “Love God and do as you please.” On the surface this may seem like a license for sin, i.e., “As long as I love God, I can do anything I want, and God’s okay with it.” but Augustine realized if you genuinely love God, you will want to do what honors him most. Nor does “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart...” (Ps. 37:4) offer a libertine stance. What then does “loving God” entail? “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3).

²⁴In fact, Kierkegaard thought Christian education was the *main obstacle* to Christian belief.

²⁵Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) begins, “Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.” And continues: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline.

respective laments on the languishing of genuine Christianity in Denmark and Germany.

Some individuals, and some faith traditions, and some theological bents have willfully created preoccupying versions. Other versions have emerged through the four centuries of Christianity in the United States as well, to name only a representative few:

- *Muscular Christianity*²⁶ – an attempt to sell a more “challenging” Christian faith than a simplistic version;
- *Reward-based Christianity* – offers, even conditionally guarantees, emotional happiness and financial prosperity *if* enough faith and determination is applied;
- *Cult Christianity* – tending to follow winsome, charismatic figures above all else;
- *Secret Christianity* – capitalizing on the notion of “the rugged individualist” to practice one’s faith in private;
- *Positive energy Christianity*²⁷ – thinking good thoughts sprinkled with Christian lingo one wills a better life into existence;
- *Violent Christianity*²⁸ – an extreme form of strong-arming social imposition into cultural practices.

But we have a nagging observation—and somewhat of a fear—captured lyrically by German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886): “It is striking how history, when resting on the memory of men, always touches the bounds of mythology.”²⁹ While he was writing about aspects of the history of the Papacy, the general historical principle seems fitting: the human tendency, even in well-meaning circumstances, is to commandeer Christianity and in the process subvert its true nature into a trifling, permuted form of itself, i.e., a mythical Christianity. David Adam Leeming³⁰ derives: “When we give form to divinity, we derive that form from our own experience. We make gods in our own image because our own image marks the physical limits of our being.”

The problem is humans have differently interpreted Christianity in many and divergent ways, thereby teaching it speciously and misconstruing the genuine version intended. This

Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”

²⁶A very insightful study is made of the changing emphases of the personality of Jesus in Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). Another fascinating critique is undertaken by Richard Wightman Fox in *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004). E.g., he claims if Jesus keeps his lofty status as a prime American cultural hero in centuries to come, it will be for two reasons: “because so many Christians find him useful as a means of congratulating themselves, and because so many find him indispensable as a critic of their self-congratulation” (25).

²⁷For a contemporary blistering assessment of this version, see, as an example, “Joel Osteen’s Gospel of Affirmation without Salvation,” September 24, 2012. <http://www.christianheadlines.com/columnists/al-mohler/joel-osteen-gospel-of-affirmation-without-salvation.html>

²⁸One remarkable example is a sermon by Pastor Steven Anderson of Faithful Word Baptist Church (Tempe, Arizona) in which he says to kill “gays is the way to an AIDS-free world by Christmas” (Tram Mai, “Pastor calls for killing gays to end AIDS,” *USAToday* (December 5, 2014). <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/12/04/pastor-calls-for-killing-gays-to-end-aids/19929973/>).

²⁹Cited in *Die Römischen Päpste in den Letzen Vier Jahrhunderten (The Roman Popes in the Last Four Centuries*; Hamburg, Germany: Hoffmann und Campe, 1834–1836), 237.

³⁰In *The World of Myth: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 123.

phenomenon, evidenced abundantly (and creatively) over the centuries, has parlayed into partitioned loyalties, confusing theologies, and divisive alliances. J. H. Bavinck opines: “We must be aware of the depth of the mystery that confronts us. Man [sic] must hesitate when he is about to say something about God’s being.”³¹ This certainly applies to how Christians have construed God’s mission in the world and how church bodies have defined, organized, and allied themselves. Of course, “my thoughts are not your thoughts...” (Isa. 55:8–9), but on more occasions in the history of Christianity in the United States than we care to admit, some have regarded God idolatrously as a bigger version of themselves.

What are—and have been—the implications of misrepresenting (intentionally or not) Christianity in the United States in its theological life and practices? While earlier we suggested a series of adjective-laden versions of Christianity, here we wish to extend and describe some of the historical-cultural-theological factors to have taken hold with alacrity on American soil.

A Patchwork Family Portrait of Christianity in the United States

Is a pure form of Christianity even possible, given the cultural vicissitudes and historical anomalies of our shared experience? How, then, have liberties or exaggerations or nimbleness of expression been undertaken? What descriptions over the four Christian-influenced centuries in the United States can be deduced and justified? Are there stereotypical observations about configurations of the Christian religion as practiced in historical memory and in current practice? We suggest three conspicuous observations about Christianity in the United States and argue these tendencies are present to varying degrees of influence and prominence in all four major branches—Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic:

First, a *double-minded, dissociative* Christianity: deeply religious *and* deeply secular. Historians William Hutchison (1930–2005)³² and Will Herberg (1901–1977)³³ say in many Western societies there is a gap between profession of belief and committed Christian practice,³⁴ *but it is most striking in the United States.*

What then does it mean “to believe” something? Sam Harris, who has no theistic belief, nevertheless affirms *belief* is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person’s life: “Whether one is a scientist, a liberal, or a racist, these are merely species of belief in action. Your beliefs, he says, decide your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior.”³⁵ In other words, if someone claims the Christian ethic, it should transform and permeate how one lives, thinks, and behaves.

But Christian belief in the American consciousness need not, in this insight, find any expression in one’s behavior. Ronald Sider (2005) details how correlated are Christian and non-Christian choices and behaviors.³⁶ Martin E. Marty claims: “Our biggest problem is not secular humanism, but interest in religion that doesn’t turn into everyday life... The faith of many Americans is a vague, oblong blur that gives them no more than a warm tingle in the

³¹In *Faith and Its Difficulties*, trans. by W. Eerdman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 128.

³²In *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke, 1992).

³³In *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

³⁴This tendency is also rife all through Europe.

³⁵In *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), 12.

³⁶*The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker).

bathtub.”³⁷ This “god” believed by so many Americans is what French sociologist Emile Durkheim describes as a symbolic representation of the collective energy and dominant values of the society that worships him.³⁸ Simply put, if God created humans in His own image, Americans have more than reciprocated.³⁹

Second, a *nominalized, civil* Christianity: excitement in celebrating “the holidays,” those vestiges of a Christian-past that carries no discernible life application for the meaning of life today. This is a close-cousin to the first observation, yet with shades of distinction. Whereas, double-minded dissociative Christians see no incongruence between belief and practice of faith in their lives and live however they choose unfazed by the strictures of Christianity, nominal, civil Christians have a firm and certain belief in the righteous comingling of political-cultural ideologies and American nationalism. John D. Capputo and Gianni Vattimo call it “a nonreligious form of Christianity.”⁴⁰ This characterization has an unwavering history. Just before the Civil War, French historian Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) described the American style of religion as democratic and republican: a unique combination of enthusiasm and egalitarianism, revivalism and republicanism, biblicism and common sense.⁴¹

British G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) famously described America as a nation with the soul of a church.⁴² No modern idea has affected history more than the passion of nationalism and segments of the Christian constituency have married their religious beliefs to national values. Jon Meacham, former managing editor of *Newsweek*, has explored the intersection of God and politics in the early American thought of the country’s luminaries.⁴³ Belief in God, he says, is central to the country’s experience, yet for the broad center, faith is a matter of choice, not coercion, and the legacy of the Founding is that sensible rhetoric for which the center holds. The victory over excessive religious experience and excessive secularism is often lost in the clatter of contemporary cultural and political strife. The God who “is spoken of and called on and prayed to in the public sphere is an essential character in the American drama.”⁴⁴ And while religion is one of the most pervasive and least understood forces in American life, it needs to be properly understood. The God of public religion is the not God of Abraham or God the Father of the Holy Trinity. The Founder’s public religion is “consummately democratic.”⁴⁵

Religious identity in the United States has been fueled by the endearing national story of *manifest destiny*. Although originally used to connote the geographical expansion of the continent, historian William E. Weeks notes three themes which define manifest destiny: the

³⁷In *A Nation of Believers* (Chicago: Chicago, 1976), 181.

³⁸In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (New York: Free, 1965).

³⁹Many have a mental picture of a Jesus who looks, thinks, and acts remarkably like themselves. Perhaps it is Jesus’ enduring appeal that confirms America’s essentially Christian character even as it demonstrates growing religious diversity and rejection of absolute truth.

⁴⁰In *After the Death of God*, ed J. W. Robbins (New York: Columbia, 2007), 32.

⁴¹*Democracy in America* (New York: Library of America, 2004, originally appearing in two volumes: 1835, 1840); see also a very interesting take on this in Peter Manseau, *One Nation Under Gods: A New American History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2015).

⁴²In *Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1997; orig. pub. in 1908).

⁴³In *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 18.

virtue of the American people and their institutions; the *mission* to spread these institutions, thereby redeeming and remaking the world in the image of the United States; the *destiny* under God to do this work. It is this third theme that grew in mythical proportion as a natural outgrowth of the belief that God had a direct influence in the foundation and further actions of the United States.⁴⁶ Simply explained, manifest destiny triumphs in the notion “that God, at the proper stage in the march of history, called forth certain hardy souls from the old and privilege-ridden nations...and that in bestowing His grace He also bestowed a peculiar responsibility.”⁴⁷ Americans presupposed they were not only divinely elected to maintain the North American continent, but also to spread abroad the fundamental principles stated in the Bill of Rights. In many cases this meant neighboring colonial holdings and countries were seen as obstacles to the destiny God had provided the United States.⁴⁸ This remains of one of the national-mythical stories Americans believe deeply.

In fact, the middle-class subculture has existed in such a close relationship with Christianity it sometimes is difficult to distinguish what is American from what is Christian.⁴⁹ Anthony Campolo offers this commentary: “In America the cultural deity offers *prosperity* to his followers; the biblical God calls upon us to *sacrifice* all that we have for the poor and suffering peoples of the world . . . the cultural deity invites *self-aggrandizement and self-assertion*, the biblical Lord calls us to be *meek and humble*. The cultural deity *legitimizes* the existing social order. We say, ‘God is with us.’ He stands for the American way because we made him in the image of America. But the biblical God stands *opposed* to this cultural deity. The God of Scripture renders us enemies of the religion instituted by our society.”⁵⁰

Third, a *personalized, evangelical* Christianity: an energetic, entrepreneurial movement. “Evangelical,” a term most often associated around the Christian world as an American feature, is one circumscribed subset of the larger Christian population, who describe themselves as “born-again,” and may be Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant, or Roman Catholic. Evangelicalism, which has gained a rather negative connotation of late among some, perhaps due to its pronounced swagger and a perceived reluctance to acknowledge contradiction of stated beliefs and actual behaviors (often in rather public ways), is described aptly by four measures⁵¹: *conversionism* (belief that lives need to be changed), *bibliocentrism* (scripture

⁴⁶In *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 1996) 58.

⁴⁷In Clinton Rossiter, “The American Mission,” *American Scholar* 20 (1950): 19–20.

⁴⁸It is this line of reasoning that spur on some to argue America is a Christian country, as evidenced by the religious belief (albeit rather Deist) of the Founding Fathers and the explicit religious language in the establishing documents of the nation. And with this baseline argument some further advance the oft-heard lament for America to “get back to our divine roots and the faith of our forefathers and become a Christian nation again.”

⁴⁹We would argue in an oversimplified account that from countervailing emphases of this same nationalistic phenomenon both Fundamentalism and Liberalism in the United States have been spawned, and that Evangelicalism in the United States is an attempt at a remedial reaction to both. For more on civil religion, see Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America’s Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); William A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁵⁰In *A Reasonable Faith: Responding to Secularism* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 101–102.

⁵¹Aptly described by David W. Bebbington, “Towards an Evangelical Identity” in *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future*, ed. Steve Brady and Harold Rowdon (London: Evangelical Alliance, 1996), 46. Randy Balmer, however, tends to think the

as the only and inerrant source of truth), *activism* (commitment of all believers to evangelism, service, and mission), and *crucicentrism* (conviction that the crucial aspect of the Christian story was the substitutionary atonement of Jesus on the cross for our sins).

The co-determination of the historical factors that evoked such a movement is also essential: the confluence of doctrinal Puritanism, continental Pietism, and high Anglican reformism coalesced as antecedents to the emergence of this experiential phenomenon.⁵² Iterations of Evangelicalism are usually some configuration, to a greater or lesser degree, of these historical factors and marked by a high-energy Christianity. To illustrate, consider the thousands of parachurch organizations—for example, overseas mission organizations; Bible distribution agencies; Christian publishing houses; Christian educational institutions at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels; evangelistic children and youth ministries; camps and sports outreaches to the poor and disadvantaged; health care initiatives. Hundreds of denominational inventions have thrust forth due to, among other sociological and theological reasons, the unique American spirit of starting new organizations from scratch.

Forces Shaping Christianity in the United States

The strengths of American Christianity are rooted in the national psyche. *Five discernible strengths* explain how Christianity has been able to explain how Christianity has remained prominent in the United States in contrast to more secular Europe:

- *Immigration.* More than half of all evangelicals are immigrants or refugees. The early migrants like the Puritans, Moravians, Amish, and others were devout Christians who left their homelands because of opposition from established churches.
- *Leadership.* From the beginning the Church was blessed by many of the finest leaders and evangelists like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, and Billy Graham.
- *Infrastructure.* The Church is supported by a host of parachurch organizations, faith-based missions, and relief agencies like World Vision and Operation Blessing.
- *Evangelism.* An unwavering commitment to evangelism began with the establishment of the American Board of Foreign Missions. American missionaries can be found in every country and in every continent.
- *Education.* The United States has a formidable Christian education system spanning all levels from kindergarten to universities and colleges.

Another feature of Christianity in the United States is the predominance of churches that

definition Bebbington (a Brit) proposes does not work as well in the context in the United States. First, Balmer contends most Christians could affirm his quadrilateral, including many Catholics, which makes it, in his view, not a terribly useful definition. Second, Balmer finds it redundant: If one affirms “biblicism,” one needs not add “crucicentrism” as a separate category; any common sense reading of the Bible—and he means “common sense” both in the generic sense and in the nineteenth-century Scottish Realism sense—would find the Cross central to scripture. Finally, it has always seemed axiomatic to Balmer that scholars should not seek to define others in language those others would never recognize. That is to say, when writing about fellow evangelicals over the past quarter-century, Balmer has yet to have someone identify himself or herself as “crucicentric.” Balmer instead prefers a more functional definition: An Evangelical believes the Bible is God’s revelation to humanity and therefore should be taken seriously, even interpreted literally; believes in the centrality of a conversion or “born again” experience (from John 3); and affirms the mandate to evangelize, derived from the Great Commission.

⁵²Mark A Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 60–69.

subscribe to historical orthodoxy (the faith handed down from the Apostles) and the relative weakness of nonconformist and heterodox churches. Unitarianism, with roots in the orthodoxy of the Puritan tradition, which once threatened to overtake New England, has virtually disappeared, while other and newer nineteenth and twentieth century emanations like Christian Science and Jehovah's Witnesses exist mainly on the fringes. Mormonism flourishes mostly abroad and is never considered a threat to the orthodox or mainline churches. Opposition to Christianity exists but only in pockets. Anticlericalism has never been a force in U.S. history unlike in Spain, France and Latin American countries.

There is another reason why Christianity has been a powerful force in shaping American destiny. The United States was conceived and founded on the principle of liberty and this concept was derived from the Gospel. And while kind of liberty that formed the political-ideological principle of the United States was unquestionably humanistic, Enlightenment-inspired political liberty, in the minds of some, this concept spilled over and was amalgamated into the Christian usage of it. Liberty forms the cornerstone of the Christian faith. In fact Paul calls it the Law of Liberty thus elevating it into a commandment. Jesus said, "You shall know the Truth and Truth shall make you free" and identified himself with Truth and Freedom. Of course, the Christian concept of freedom is much broader than freedom from political tyranny and covers freedom from sin, illness, poverty, prejudice, addiction, greed, violence, oppression, sexual deviance, false beliefs, exploitation, and other ills that are part of the human condition. By adopting liberty as its goal, the United States formed an unbreakable link with Christianity.⁵³

Studies on the status of Christianity in the United States are complicated by the fact that religious demographic data (raw numbers and percentages) do not give us any clue as to the intensity, depth and quality of religious life and experience. A number of problems affect the validity of the data. First is the very definition of the term "Christian." When the term was first used in Antioch in the first century to describe a person the suffix *-ian* was an indication that the person was a slave of or belonged to the subject referred to in the first part. Thus a Christian was a slave of or one who belonged to Christ. This definition was diluted over the years until it became simply a label rather than a status. It is applied on the one hand to giants of the faith like Paul, Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila or Ignatius of Loyola and on the other to anyone who has Christian parents or nominally belongs to a denomination even if their faith lacks commitment and certitude. In religious statistics all these people are lumped together as Christians and thus numbers are no indicators of the real religious fiber of the believers or the quality of religious life in a country.

Further, there is constant attrition and the rate of falling away or apostasy varies from country to country and from denomination to denomination. Emigration and immigration are also constantly altering religious statistics.

A Snapshot of Christianity in the United States

According to available data in 2014, of the total US population of 315 million, about 248 million are Christians. Of these 203 million are affiliated and 102 million are evangelicals—though another study estimates a more moderate number of about one-quarter instead of one-

⁵³Again, Fea's book, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation*, provides a fine background of this idea; see n. 12.

half.⁵⁴ The proportions of affiliated or practicing Christians as well as evangelicals are both higher than in any other Western country. That notwithstanding, Americans are increasing more apt to describe themselves as spiritual but unaffiliated.

In fact, as gauged from a longitudinal study by the Pew Research Center comparing snapshot trends from 2007 and 2014, the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points from 78% to 70%. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated—describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”—has jumped from 16% to 23%. And the share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths also has inched up from 5% in 2007 to 6% in 2014.

The changing religious landscape (as of 2014) is composed of the following percentage of US adults: Evangelical Protestants (25%); “Nones”/Unaffiliated (atheist/agnostic/nothing) (22%); Roman Catholic (21%); Mainline Protestants (15%); Historically Black (7%); Jewish and “Other” (2% each); and Muslim/Jehovah’s Witness/Buddhist/Orthodox Christian (at less than 1% each).⁵⁵ While many U.S. religious groups are aging, the unaffiliated are

⁵⁴“U.S. Religious Landscape Survey Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant,” *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (June 2008). Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>. See p. 110.

⁵⁵See, Cathy Lynn Grossman “Christians drop, ‘nones’ soar in new religion portrait,” *USAToday* (May 12, 2015) for a synopsis of the larger Pew Research Center 2014 study. Accessed on May 12, 2015. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/05/12/christians-drop-nones-soar-in-new-religion-portfolio/27159533/> The full report can be found here: “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” – <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-05-08-full-report.pdf>. Other highlights in the 2014 Pew Research Center report on the emergence of “nones” in US include:

1. Religiously unaffiliated is growing in all geographic regions of the country (19% in the South; 22% in the Midwest, 25% in the Northeast, and 28% in the West).
2. Whites are more likely than blacks and Hispanics to identify as religiously unaffiliated (24% of whites compared with 20% of Hispanics and 18% of blacks).
3. The percentage of college graduates who identify with Christianity has declined since 2007 (from 73% to 64%). The Christian share of the population has declined by a similar amount among those with less than a college education (from 81% to 73%).
4. More than a quarter of men (27%) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up from 20% in 2007. Fewer women are religious “nones,” but the religiously unaffiliated are growing among women at about the same rate as among men. Nearly one-in-five women (19%) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up from 13% in 2007.
5. The retention rate of the unaffiliated has increased. In the 2014 survey, 53% of those raised as religiously unaffiliated still identify as “nones” in adulthood, up seven points since 2007.
6. While the mainline Protestant share of the population is significantly smaller today than it was in 2007, not so with the evangelical Protestant share. As a result, evangelicals now constitute a majority (55%) of all U.S. Protestants. In 2007, roughly half of Protestants (51%) identified with evangelical churches.
7. Since 2007, the share of evangelical Protestants who identify with Baptist denominations has shrunk from 41% to 36%. Meanwhile, the share of evangelicals identifying with nondenominational churches has grown from 13% to 19%.
8. The United Methodist Church (UMC) continues to be the largest denomination within the mainline Protestant tradition (currently, 25% of mainline Protestants, down slightly from 28% in 2007).
9. More than six-in-ten people in the historically black Protestant tradition identify with Baptist

comparatively young—and getting *younger*, on average, over time. As a rising cohort of highly unaffiliated Millennials reaches adulthood, the median age of unaffiliated adults has dropped to 36, down from 38 in 2007 and far lower than the general (adult) population’s median age of 46. By contrast, the median age of mainline Protestant adults in the new survey is 52 (up from 50 in 2007), and the median age of Catholic adults is 49 (up from 45 seven years earlier).

The shifts over this seven-year snapshot describe variations within subgroups:

- *Mainline Protestantism*—a tradition that includes the United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Churches USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church, among others—appears to have experienced the greatest drop in absolute numbers.
- The *historically black Protestant churches*—which includes the National Baptist Convention, the Church of God in Christ, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Progressive Baptist Convention and others—has remained relatively stable.
- *Evangelical Protestant tradition*—including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church in America, and other evangelical denominations and many nondenominational congregations—see an increase of roughly 2 million since 2007.
- *Catholics* appear to be declining and have been losing more adherents through religious switching than it has been gaining. The proportion of Catholics reporting strong religious affiliation declined by almost twenty percentage points over the last few decades, from 46 percent of Catholics in 1974 to 27 percent in 2012.⁵⁶
- The *religiously unaffiliated* adults have increased by roughly 19 million since 2007. This group—sometimes called religious “nones”—is more numerous than either Catholics or mainline Protestants, according to the new survey. Indeed, the unaffiliated are now second in size only to evangelical Protestants among major religious groups in the U.S. One factor in the growth of the “nones” is *generational replacement*. As the Millennial generation enters adulthood, its members display lower levels of religious affiliation than older generations. One-third of young Millennials (ages 18-24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are one-third of older Millennials (ages 25-33). Fewer than six-in-ten Millennials identify with any branch of Christianity, compared with seven-in-ten or more among older generations, including Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers.

denominations, including 22% who identify with the National Baptist Convention, the largest denomination within the historically black Protestant tradition.

10. The share of the public identifying with religions other than Christianity has grown from 5% in 2007 to 6% in 2014. Gains were most pronounced among Muslims (who accounted for 0.4% of respondents in the 2007 Religious Landscape Study and 0.9% in 2014) and Hindus (0.4% in 2007 vs. 0.7% in 2014).
11. Roughly one-in-seven participants in the new survey (15%) were born outside the U.S., and two-thirds of those immigrants are Christians, including 39% who are Catholic. More than one-in-ten immigrants identify with a non-Christian faith, such as Islam or Hinduism.
12. Hindus and Jews continue to be the most highly educated religious traditions. Fully 77% of Hindus are college graduates, as are 59% of Jews (compared with 27% of all U.S. adults). These groups also have above-average household incomes. Fully 44% of Jews and 36% of Hindus say their annual family income exceeds \$100,000, compared with 19% of the public overall.

⁵⁶James R. Rogers, “Protestant Perseverance and Catholic Decline?” *First Things* (April 30, 2013) -- <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/04/protestant-perseverance-and-catholic-decline>. Accessed January 8, 2016.

Why Study the History of Christianity in the United States?

The academic discipline of history has been a tough sell among students and popular culture. Likewise, many Christians are more committed to investigating the Bible and contemporary culture than the centuries between them. Irrelevance, revisionist historical claims, and a penchant toward pragmatism have been major detractors. The work of the historian has been somewhat lambasted as well with sarcasm and humor. American writer Franklin P. Jones (1908–1980) humorously noted: “Perhaps nobody has changed the course of history as much as the historians.”⁵⁷ Point taken, yet we prefer the following musings. British historian George Macaulay Trevelyan (1876–1962) says history is the open Bible: historians are not priests to expound it infallibly; historians’ function is to teach people to read it and to reflect upon it for themselves. American Pulitzer-prize winning author David McCullough characterizes history as an agent of determining who we are and why we are the way we are.

These latter observations are important in justifying the need for and effort put forth in this present five-volume compilation of 2.5 million words to expound and illuminate four centuries of Christian history in the United States: *to reflect upon who we are and how we got this way*.

In addition, we are drawn to an intriguing idea of John Fea. An encounter with the past, he says, void of present-minded agendas, can cultivate the virtues of empathy, humility, selflessness, and hospitality. By studying history, we learn to listen to voices that differ from our own. This, he concludes, is the essence of *intellectual hospitality*.

Further, we appreciate insight into the Christian historian’s task by Jay Green, whose emphasis on the divine command to remember, a recurring theme from the biblical narrative, provides a link between social memory and identity preservation. The capacity for collective memory is a counter to present-oriented cultures who have developed an acute case of amnesia. And so, historians, he argues, occupy a theologically critical office when they practice their craft: *the vocation of remembering*.⁵⁸

In sum, one of the implicit intentions of this article is to facilitate greater *reflection* on our national and personal circumstances in light of our historical awareness; to *hospitably* engage ideas, cultures, and practices of faith tradition beyond the normal scope of our direct experiences; and to *recall* the gracious, sovereign mission of God in his Church in the United States.

⁵⁷In Joseph M. Herson, Jr., “The Last Whig Historian and Consensus History: George Macaulay Trevelyan, 1876–1962,” *American Historical Review* 81, no. 1 (1976): 66–97.

⁵⁸Both these ideas can be found in Eric Miller, John Fea, and Jay Green, “So What Is the Historian’s Vocation?,” *Books & Culture* (January/February 2012) – <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2012/janfeb/historiansvocation.html>, and compiled in fuller form in John Fea, Jay Green, Eric Miller, eds., *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian’s Vocation* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame, 2010).