

GLOBALIZATION, SYNCRETISM, AND RELIGIOSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

Although the phenomenon of “globalization” has become a central focus of intellectual interest, the globalization of religion and religiosity has largely been ignored. This is in spite of the fact that religion has both changed and been changed by the forces of globalization. Focusing on a comparative study of religion and religious change in Britain and Western Europe, it is found that the United States has taken a direction apart from other postindustrial societies. The central postulate is derived that major social institutions are not “unilinear” vis-à-vis the dynamics of globalization. This is clearly seen by considering the effects of differential rationalization. Additionally, the structural forces in the United States that have facilitated “micro” changes in religious affiliation have progressively led to qualitative changes with respect to religious “dwelling” and “seeking.”

*“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold” –
Yeats*

*“...the old gods were dying while the new
ones had not yet been born” –Durkheim*

INTRODUCTION

The ‘New’ Religiosity: Social Dynamics in Global Context

Considered separately, the concepts of “globalization”, “syncretism”, and “religiosity” have formed the basis for the themes of many sociological investigations. Rarely, however, have they been employed in combination in an attempt to provide an explanation for changes in current religious beliefs and practices. It is now apparent all three concepts can increasingly be seen to play a central role in an analysis of religious change. This can clearly be seen with an examination of the central meanings of each of the three concepts. *Globalization* implies the process of expanding social networks, modifying these networks, and reshaping them in new ways (cf. Sassen 2007; Steger 2009). The notion of

syncretism, denoting the combination of more traditional forms of belief into new and different forms, takes on global significance as religious beliefs can be diffused across cultures in the same way as economic systems or political beliefs. Finally, *religiosity* is a dimension distinct from religious membership. While membership in a religious organization may indicate religiosity, it is a partial indicator at best: for example, 59% of adults in the U.S. pray at least once a day (an indicator of religiosity), while only 31% report regular attendance at their place of worship (NORC 2007:175,183).

With respect to religion, these three concepts converge to explain much with respect to the changes in the religious landscape that are emerging. Cast in the framework of Moore’s thesis of differential rationalization –an elaboration of Weber’s theory of rationalization– it may be seen that these global changes within religion are not homogeneous across societies. Taking religiosity in Europe, and particularly in Great Britain as an analytic backdrop, it is demonstrated that religion in the United States is distinctive in several respects. A number of empirical demonstrations are offered in support of this thesis, and the theory of differential rationalization provides an overarching explanatory framework.

Table 1: Church Membership in Britain: 1900-2000

YEAR	MEMBERS (millions)	POPULATION (millions)	MEMBERS AS PERCENT OF POPULATION
1900	8,664	32,237	27%
1920	9,803	44,027	22%
1940	10,017	47,769	21%
1960	9,918	52,709	19%
1980	7,529	56,353	13%
2000	5,862	59,122	10%

Source: Brierley, 2000.

Finally, what may legitimately be seen as the effects of globalization on religiosity in United States are explicated, and the role of differential rationalization on mitigating these effects is identified.

Is The United States Different?

A comprehensive meta-analysis by Bruce (2001) entitled *Christianity in Britain, R.I.P.* effectively argues that religion in England has been diminished to the point of near-extinction. He stated, "Recently gathered data on church membership and church attendance show that unless trends are reversed, major British denominations will cease to exist by 2030" (Bruce 2001:191). Working historically and reporting data gathered since the mid-19th century, Bruce found exactly the opposite of what Stark and Bainbridge (1987), Stark, Finke and Iaconne (1995), and Stark (1999) have long argued—that religious membership and religiosity are increasing.¹ Stark has pointedly singled out religious participation in Britain as evidence of this increase.

Examining the data longitudinally, however, that evidence now looks thin. The first national census in Britain (the Census of Religious Worship) was conducted in 1851. While the census conflated such important data as "attendances" with "attendees" (thus providing a likely overestimation of church attendance), contemporary analyses of the data appear to be in sharp contrast to the thesis presented by Stark et al. Based on his own assessment, Brown (1987; 1993), as well as that of Crockett (1998), provides the very

conservative estimate that "between 40 and 60 percent of the adult population of Great Britain in 1851 attended church" (Brown 2001:194). By comparison, a rigorous study recently conducted by Brierly (2000) concluded that in 1998, not quite 10% of the adult British population attended church. In fact, the decline in church attendance in the United Kingdom has declined steadily over the past century, as Table 1 illustrates. Clearly, the study of church membership, measured at twenty-year intervals over the past 100 years, points to a steady decline. While these data are not absolute indicators of a decline in religiosity, it would be extremely difficult to present a valid argument that religiosity would have increased in the face of this evidence.

This downward trend is very likely to continue. After a survey of data involving Sunday school attendance, Brown concluded "...the vast majority of young Britons have no church connection or religious socialization" (Brown 2001:196), and that both the numbers of full-time clergy as well as available funding for major religious organizations have declined rapidly.²

The most precipitous decline, in fact, appears to be within established denominations. Based on his examination of church data, Sawkins (1998) found that there has been a gradual and consistent decline in Methodist church attendance that averages between 1-2% per year. At that rate of decline, he predicts that in the year 2031, the Methodist Church will cease to exist in Britain. Even the Church of England is not immune to

this trend. As evidence, Bruce (2001) found in 1962, the number of baptisms in the Church of England represented 53% of the entire number of baptisms; by 1993, this had dropped to 27%.

If one were to assume a zero-sum constancy of religious beliefs and practices, this abandonment over time of the major denominations would be replaced by NRMs, or New Religious Movements. In Britain, there has been an increase in numbers for each of these religious groups: Christadelphians, Christian Scientists, Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. Together, their membership numbered over 500,000 in 2000 (Brierley 2000). This represents a marked increase over their numbers in earlier decades, however, as Bruce (2001) noted, that figure of one-half million makes up for only one-sixth of the losses sustained by mainstream churches. Thus, while NRMs are increasing in numbers, these gains are overwhelmed by the overall losses within organized religion in Britain. There exists also the possibility that "private religion" –or what Davie (1994) termed "believing without belonging"– has become the dominant mode of religious expression, and this has simply replaced organized religion. To which Bruce (2001:201) argued, "...it is difficult to suppose that the almost universal decline of the

Christian churches in Britain does not signify a decline in the demand for Christianity." This does not preclude, of course, the possible rise of new forms of religiosity that are syncretic in nature, and this may very well include New Age beliefs (cf. Cimino and Lattin 1999; Wesselman 2001).

The religious ground in Britain is shifting in a far more dramatic way than this, and this in turn provides a vital clue to both the vibrancy and globalization of religion in the U.S. The British Office for National Statistics estimates that by 2009, there were 2.4 million Muslims in Britain, making Islam now represent the second largest religion in Britain. Over the study's four year period, the increase of Islam was *ten times* the general growth in population. At the same time, the number of Christians actually *fell* by two million during 2004-2008. Growing numbers of Hindus comprised the third largest religious group at 707,000, with Sikhs following at 389,000. Clearly, the effects of globalization through in-migration are apparent here. Now ranking fifth, just below the population of Jews in Britain, are Buddhists, who number 214,000. Significantly, the second largest group in Britain are those who profess to have "*no religion at all*" (italics added) at slightly over 11½ million.³

Figure 1: Comparative Religiosity as Measured by Participation in Religious Organizations and Frequency of Prayer



Those sociologists of religion who have taken a directly opposite interpretation of religious change in Britain and elsewhere have been termed “supply siders” (cf. Casanova 2001), and this perspective is exemplified in the works of Stark (cf. Stark 1999) and his colleagues (cf. Stark, Finke, and Iaconne 1995). These scholars argue that religious beliefs and practices –including organized Christian religion in Britain– have remained constant or are even increasing. In a sharp rejoinder, however, Bruce (2001:202) concludes, “When the Methodists, the exemplars of nineteenth-century dissent, finally fold around 2030, when the Church of England is reduced to a trivial voluntary association with a large portfolio of heritage property, and when church attendance [in Britain] falls below one percent, will the supply-siders finally stop insisting that secularization is a myth”?

Is the case of secularization and the general decline of religion in Britain as a developed, post-industrial nation, atypical? It appears not to be– in fact, the rates of church attendance in many nations are actually lower than those of Britain. Results from a comprehensive investigation (Norris and Inglehart 2004) find that the process of secularization is increasing in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Western Europe generally. In Western Europe, the weekly church attendance in France is 21%; in Austria and Switzerland this drops to 15%. However, even with these figures low and declining, they are still much lower elsewhere. In Sweden and Finland, for example, church attendance now stands at 4% and may not yet have reached its lowest point (Streich 2009). In France, the famed nationalist historian Jules Michelet –in an admittedly overreaching statement– proclaimed that it was now thrust upon France to take on the role formerly occupied by God (‘whom we miss’) and that French society would now have to fill the “incomprehensible abyss left by an extinguished Christianity” (Bernstein 1999:114). As expressed in Figure 1, when the indicator “participation in religious organizations” is paired with “frequency of prayer” (a measure of religiosity), only the

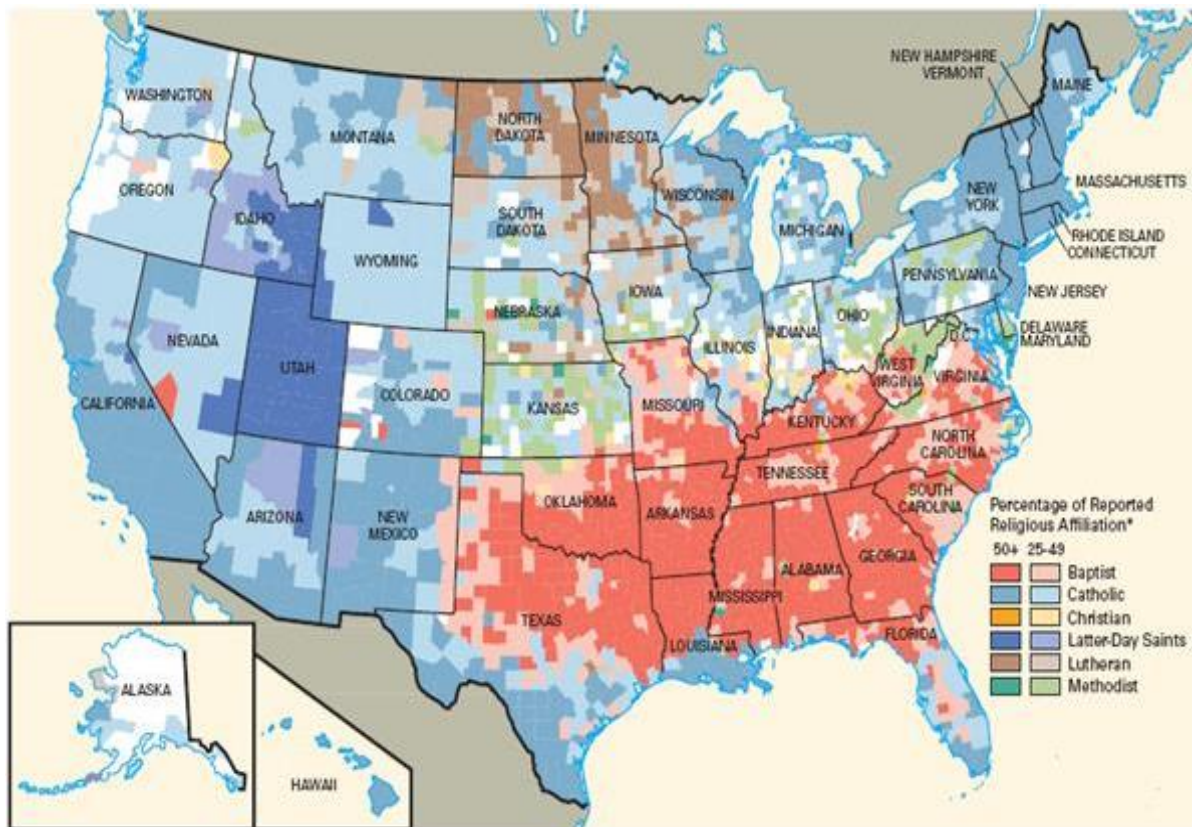
United States, Italy, and Poland stand out as retaining a strongly religious dimension, while France, Denmark, Britain, Germany, Spain, Japan, Australia, and Canada exhibit far lower levels of religious membership and religiosity.

But how different is this than the expression of religion and religiosity in the United States? Perhaps there is a secularization trend similar to that of Britain and the rest of the Western European countries, only characterized by something akin to “cultural lag”, meaning that the decline has been less precipitous, but will be equally as inevitable at some future point. If true, the processes involving globalization and religious decline could be viewed as essentially unidirectional, and strong predictive statements could thus be made regarding its progression. Given, however, the overwhelming amount of data on participation in religious organizations and religiosity in the U.S., bold assertions about the future effects of globalization in this respect would appear to be highly suspect. Approximately 85% of U.S. adults identify with some form of organized religion (NORC 2005:169). Ninety percent of all American adults claim to have received some degree of

Table 2: Religious Identification in the United States by Denomination (2004)

<u>Religion</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Protestant Denominations	52.7
Baptist	17.7
Methodist	6.8
Lutheran	4.5
Presbyterian	2.4
Episcopalian	2.1
All others or no expressed denomination	19.2
Catholics	23.3
Jewish	2.0
Other or no answer	7.6
<u>No religious preference</u>	<u>14.3</u>

Source: General Social Surveys, 1972-2004: Cumulative Codebook (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2005).

Figure 2: Distribution by Religious Denomination in the United States.

*When two or more churches have 25-49% of the membership in a county, the largest is shown. When no church has 25% of the membership, that county is left blank. Source: Glenmary Research Center (2002)

religious instruction while growing up (NORC 2005:4405). As Table 2 indicates, many Americans remain committed to an established organized religion. Moreover, approximately three-fourths of the children born in the U.S. remain in their parents' religion, indicating a degree of stability not found in many regions of Western Europe and Great Britain.⁴ Thus, unless one were to assume that this steadfastness of established religious membership serves only the function of forming and reinforcing communal ties, a strong sense of sustained religiosity also obtains.

Not only does there appear to be stability over time, but also regional stability in terms of membership, as shown in Figure 2. This would suggest that mainstream religions are not necessarily being displaced by NRMs. Rather, just as public and private religion do

not necessarily conflict, traditional, modern, and postmodern religious forms and beliefs may co-exist in largely the same fashion. Further, these denominations tend to be regionally distributed, reflecting a relative permanence in the overall cultural patterns within these areas.

POSTMODERNITY AND RELIGION: THE U.S. DEPARTURE FROM THE "GRAND NARRATIVE" OF GLOBALIZATION

Has the United States, in fact, taken a qualitatively different turn, moving away from other western, post-industrial nations with respect to religion? If so, this would be a significant factor in predicting the independent course that the United States may take with respect to globalization as well as its own changing global image and

cultural identity. In considering the characteristics of globalization, Cassanova (2001:423) remarked, "While continuous with modernity, globalization breaks with the grand narratives and philosophies of history, undermines the hegemonic power of Western universalization, and decenters the world system. In this sense, globalization is post-modern, post-colonial, and post-Western." If globalization is a totalizing process, and if globalization involves the inevitable sweep of continuous change, differing only at variable rates, how is it also possible that this is 'post-modern' in the sense that there is no central process— that is, that no clear unilinear development exists? It does appear that no major institution in any developing society is immune to the forces of global change. In fact, the institution of family organization – once thought to be the most 'stable' social institution— has been repeatedly singled out as the most rapidly changing institution in the United States (Bianchi and Spain 1996), and the 'traditional' family in its most traditional sense is no longer the dominant institutional form. According to the U.S. Census in 1950, for example, one in ten households reported having a single adult. By 2006, this number had increased to one in four, comprising a total of thirty million single adults in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Comparatively, it is important to assess the relative rate of change of religion to the family.

The course of religious development in the United States is different from that of the family, but the reasons have remained obscure. If we return to the narrative of developments in Britain, one important parallel emerges—Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism are increasing, and this is not directly at the expense of Christianity, the denominations of which appears to be in rapid decline. This is not only the result of immigration alone. It is also important to consider one's prior national identity as well as to the social capital that belonging to –and commitment to– large communities of like-minded believers can provide. One is not

"the Other" inside these communities, and common cause can be found.

On a much larger scale, the same can be said for immigrant groups in the United States, and it might be posited that this is a factor in the phenomenon of ethnic succession. Referring to Figure 3, it can be seen that Catholicism, while losing traditional, resident members in the United States (cf. Steinfels 2003), has retained its overall numbers (approximately 23%) of the U.S. population. On closer examination of Figure 2, it is evident that the growth has been centered close to the southwestern border with Mexico and in California. Thus, Catholicism in the United States has become largely a bilingual, multi-ethnic religion as a result of this large number of immigrants retaining their native religion. In fact, even though Catholicism has experienced the largest drop in *traditional* membership of any of the major religions in the United States (Mossaad and Mather 2008), Catholicism has remained robust for this reason.

The relatively high birthrate of Hispanic/Latino groups also contributes to this growth of Catholicism— e.g., the fertility rate for women who are Mexican immigrants to the United States is 3.51, which is significantly higher than for women who remain in Mexico (Camarota 2005). High birthrate is also a central factor in the rapid growth of the fourth largest organized religion in the United States— the Church of Latter-Day Saints (*Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 1992:1518).

Apparently religion –both in terms of organized religion and the less-well understood dimension of religiosity— does not seem to have changed as dramatically as other social institutions –such as the family in the United States—, and has certainly not declined in the precipitous manner experienced by European nations particularly. The reasons for this are in part captured by a recent reformulation of Weber's theory of rationalization.

DIFFERENTIAL RATIONALIZATION AND THE PERSISTENCE OF RELIGION

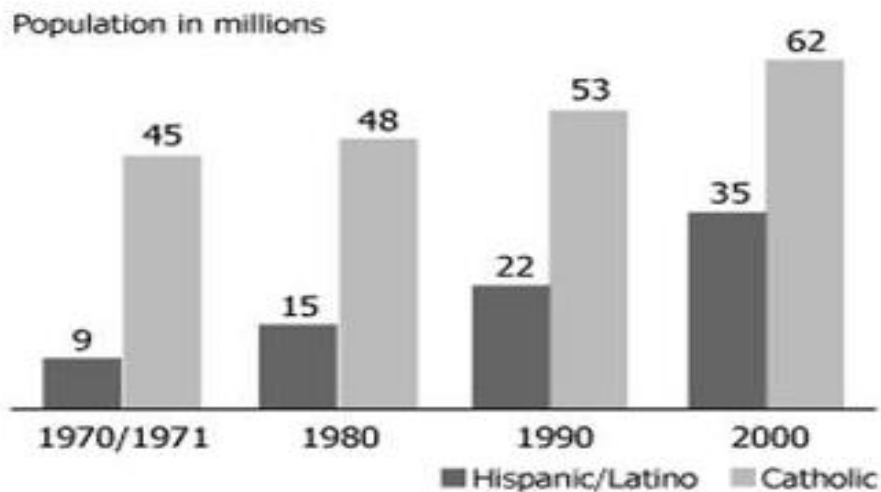
Moore (1979) has provided an important clue to this incongruous development in the post-modern, “globalized” world. There exist, he posits, cultural aspects that facilitate, constrain, or –rarely– even contradict the rational developments that are associated with globalization. He takes “rationalization” in the Weberian sense here, as a steady progression of calculability, modes of efficiency, predictability, and control– which ultimately leads to a “this-worldly” secular worldview. It was, of course, in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), that Weber explicated the reasons for the decline of religion in the West– that a ‘rational’ ethic within Protestantism would generate an ethos of capitalism that would erode the foundations of religion. Even the ideals of the Enlightenment itself would be ground under the heel of this emerging ethos. In fact, Weber proclaimed that long before his writing *The Protestant Ethic* in 1903-1904, the ascendance of rationality –the “line of development having *universal* (italics in original) significance and value” (Weber, 1958:13)– had taken place.

Moore’s refinement of this “universal” force of rationality contradicts, in a fundamental

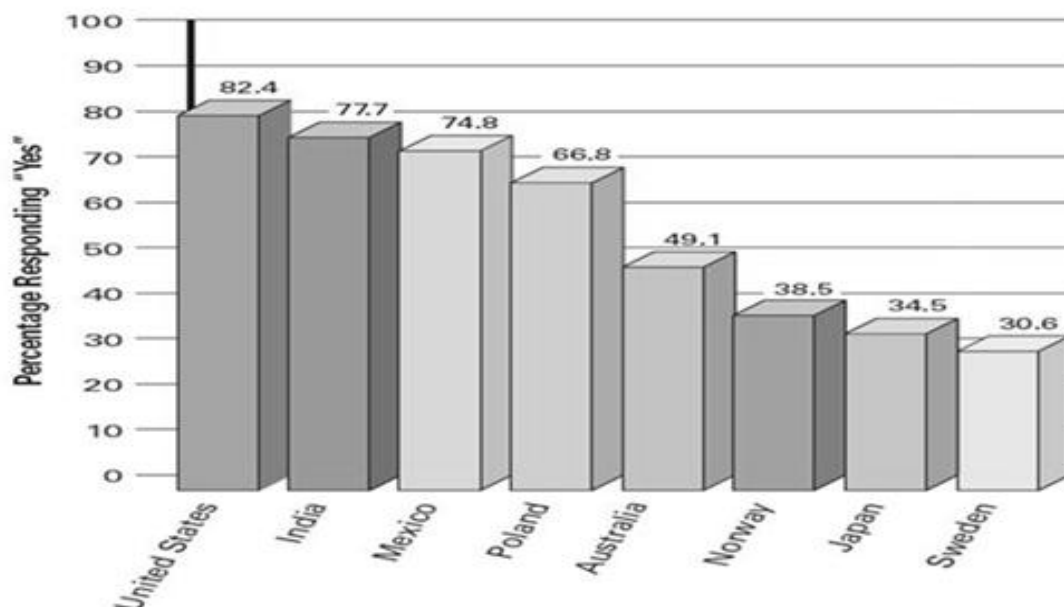
way, the universality of Weber’s, and later theorists’, assumptions about the notion of globalization. Moore posited that there exists, in every culture, a complex structure of deeply-held values, beliefs, and norms that can lead to what he terms “differential” rationalization. With respect to religion, this may constitute one important explanation for the large disparity in religion and religiosity between one post-industrial society and another. Moore, citing the difference between Weber’s notions of *zweckrationalitaet* (instrumental rationality) and *wertrationalitaet* (value rationality), suggested a reason for this persistence of religion. While economic modes of production, legal codes, and political styles of foundations that involve value rationality. Moore (1979:133) wrote, “If new religious sects and cults proliferate...older religious traditions also survive, along with more secular but still non-rational traditional identifications and allegiances.”

In concert with such significant factors such as immigration and birth rates, differential rationalization constitutes a significant theoretical contribution with respect to the existence of a unique complex of values in the United States. The notion of differential rationalization adds an important theoretical dimension to any consideration of

Fig. 3: U.S. Hispanic/Latino and Catholic Populations, 1970-2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau and Glenary Research Center, 2002.

Figure 4: Comparative Attitudes and The Centrality Of Religion

Survey Question: "Do you gain comfort and strength from religion?"

Source: Inglehart et al. 2000

globalization, particularly those that involve an explanation for the quest for religious meaning. It indicates that a society's underlying ethos⁵ (much as Weber suggested) may direct the development a society takes as it becomes part of the global community, and with respect to religion in the United States, this is especially salient. While it appears that a very high number of those living in Britain and western European nations are forsaking any form of religion, in the United States, a different phenomenon is occurring.

Despite the fact that religion in the United States is consistently changing in form relative to other post-industrial societies, religion is deeply felt in the life-worlds of a majority of Americans. As shown in Figure 4, religious belief remains a central aspect of their lives, over and above virtually all other industrial and post-industrial societies. The question, "Do you gain comfort and strength from religion" indicates that religiosity in the United States still exceeds even more traditionally religious societies such as India, Mexico, and Poland.

While this might indicate religious stability within organized religion in the United States, there is an increasing practice of what is often referred to as "denominational switching". Wuthnow (1989), comparing Gallup poll results across three decades, found that in 1955 only one in twenty Americans switched denominations, but by 1985 this number had climbed to one in every three Americans switching denominations. Roberts (1995:130) importantly noted "Switching of denomination does not necessarily involve a conversion. It may not involve any change of world view." What denominational switching may very well do, however, is to legitimize secular values.

It appears, for example, that even within conservative religious organizations, which are generally thought to be increasing disproportionately in membership, the growth is from gaining members from other religious groups with similar political perspectives (cf. Kelly 1972). The obvious paradox here is that, in a nation that formally rests on secular foundations, political life often merges with religious life. By contrast, in other nations that were constitutional monarchies until very

recently, in broad historical outline, religion itself has been largely abandoned regardless of political involvement or orientation. In this way, religious belonging in the United States has retained a fair degree of social and political capital, but very possibly at the expense of religiosity or even commitment to one established organization.

Based on this, Wuthnow has also observed a further transition that has come to render the American experience unique. Much more significant than denomination switching, Americans have moved from religious “dwelling” to religious “seeking”. He remarked, “People who are faced with a dizzying array of choices and who experience so much uncertainty and change that they must negotiate and renegotiate their relationships, if not their very identities, are likely to find it easier to imagine that the sacred manifests itself at odd times and in less predictable ways” (Wuthnow 1998:7). Globalization clearly plays a central role here, bringing into the field of choice entirely new religious organizations and perspectives. This echoes the analysis of American character by David Riesman in his classic work, *The Lonely Crowd* (1952), in which he identifies the transition from an ‘inner-directed’ social character, which is formed by strong attachments to social institutions such as the community, family and religion, to an ‘other-directed’ social character, in which these ties begin to break down, and the quest for re-anchoring identity begins. Here, the intersection between religion and this quest become manifest through both immigration and access. Wicca, a neo-pagan religion, for example, is the fastest-growing religion in the United States by percent, growing from 8,000 adherents in 1990 to 134,000 in 2001. The number of Wiccans in the United States appears to be doubling every 30 months (American Religious Identification Survey 2001). At the same time, all forms of Buddhism has increased 170%, becoming the third most practiced religion in the United States. Even more significantly perhaps is that most American Buddhists (70%) are native-born converts; only 30% of American Buddhists come from in-migration. Hindus in

the United States now number one million, with their numbers increasing largely as a result of in-migration and birth rates (Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey 2010).

What the data increasingly suggest is that the practice of religion in the United States is to a significant degree a unique response to globalization. The direction that new forms of religiosity has taken is one of religious seekership, in the manner that Wuthnow described. In seeking new religious directions, choices are now available that were not even in existence a few decades ago. Beyond the forces of immigration and birth rates lies a developing ethos of the acceptability of choice regarding religious belief. This in turn has been fueled by access. Certainly the media carry information, but they often confer a sense of legitimacy to new religions. The result of this could be what Cassanova (2001:429) termed *glocalization*. While referring to this as another “awful neologism”, he finds it useful as a way to explain the fragmentation of what had been the “national” into ever smaller units, while simultaneously becoming part of a larger (i.e., international or fully global) unit. There is a reciprocity between the global and the local, and yet both have become virtual— what is ‘local’ includes persons who form a community, but never meet; the “global” increasingly becomes the torrent of knowledge drawn from several sources at once. In this sense, religion has become globalized, and what Cassanova refers to as “deterritorialization” takes place. He concluded, “...local and transnational identities, particularly religious ones, are likely to become ever more prominent” (Cassanova 2001:430). The United States is not immune to this, and it may very well be that even traditional religions will remain vibrant to the degree that they are able to absorb elements of this transnational community of seekers, which at the same time they may fervently deny the legitimacy of these very same elements, while reaffirming traditional ties to their local communities. “Globalization”, with respect to religion, leads to syncretic transformations in ways that are becoming, at once increasingly macro in scale, yet also far

more subtle in reshaping social and personal values.

END NOTES

- ¹ Interestingly, the argument presented by Luce, in his recent book *In Spite of the Gods* (2007) would find resonance with respect to India's economic rise in much of Bruce's argument; viz, that religion as dominant factor has been dramatically diminished
- ² Brown (2001:199) noted 'Most of the major UK [religious] organizations now depend for almost half their income on profits from invested capital garnered during better days.'
- ³ Source: Labor Force Survey Report (quoted in *The Times of London Online*: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article5621482.ece>).
- ⁴ Of course, this may be true in many instances of Europe and the U.K. because parents do not belong to an established religion, and so the notion of ascription does not apply.
- ⁵ The discussion could be extended, with respect to a discussion of the importance of religion, to what Geertz (1973) refers to religious beliefs as the power to establish "moods and motivations", for large social groups.

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