CHAPTER 17

Christian Affiliation and Disaffiliation in the United States: Generational and Cultural Change

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Introduction

A major shift is taking place in the topography of Christian affiliation in the Western world. This is especially apparent in the United States. For much of the twentieth century, from the 1940s when national opinion surveys first began, until the early 1990s, a very small minority of American adults expressed no religious affiliation. In the early 1970s, for example, 7 percent of American adults reported no religious affiliation (Glenn 1987). By the late 1990s, this figure had doubled (Hout and Fischer 2002) and by 2013 had almost tripled with 20 percent of Americans indicating no religious preference. This means that whereas 88 percent of Americans identified as Christian in the early 1970s, far fewer, 73 percent, do so today (Pew Forum 2012: 13–14). As has been shown for self-reported church attendance rates (for example, Hadaway et al. 1993), the pattern of exceptionally high rates of self-reported religious affiliation in the U.S. may be a reflection more of social desirability than of the meaning or practice of religion in America. In any event, the data indicate that there has been a decline in either the social desirability, or, and, in the actual relevance, of religious affiliation in the U.S. Indeed, for the first time in American history, Protestantism is no longer the denomination of the majority of Americans, though Protestants are still close to being a majority, comprising 48 percent. Catholics, the single largest Christian denomination, have maintained a relatively stable 24 percent share of the population over the last several decades, bolstered in considerable part by immigration from Mexico and Central and South America. Immigration has always fueled American religiosity—from the early Puritans to the multiple waves of European Catholics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And in the current cultural moment of disaffiliation, the proportion of unaffiliated Americans would be even more pronounced were it not for the increasing presence of Latino immigrants and their descendants, close to two-thirds of whom are Catholic (58 percent) and one-third mainly evangelical or Pentecostal (Pew Forum 2008).
While the narrative underlying the transformative trend towards disaffiliation is complex, a generational lens helps to illuminate the dynamics of change. Younger age Americans, those between 18 and 29, the so-called millennial generation born between 1981 and 1994, are the most likely to be religiously unaffiliated. One-third (34 percent) of this age group compared to one-fifth of those born even only fifteen years ahead of them, and far fewer of older age Americans, are unaffiliated. Young adults, typically, are less religiously involved than older age individuals; for many, the college years offer a moratorium from traditional adult responsibilities and commitments and provide time for personal exploration and experimentation (for example, Hout and Greeley 1987; Bengston et al. 2012). Thus as sociologists have long documented, there has tended to be a life-cycle logic to religious involvement with young adults after a period of reduced involvement, returning to church as they settle down, marry and have children (for example, Pearce and Axinn 1998). Indeed, family formation and having young school-age children in the home are among the strongest predictors of who goes to church (for example, Myers 1996; Dillon and Wink 2007). What is noteworthy about the exponential increase in the ranks of the unaffiliated is that in the past, withdrawal from church attendance even for a lengthy interval was not accompanied by denominational disaffiliation. Thus scholars today wonder whether the current, unprecedented trend towards disaffiliation, and its particular pronouncement among the young, portends for a radical shift in American church-going practices and in the place of religion, especially Christianity, in the cultural zeitgeist as a whole.

Generational dynamics have always shaped the contours of religion in America. Thus while the millennial generation is in the vanguard of disaffiliation, earlier generations too have made their mark on the evolution of American religion and culture. The baby boomers, in particular, stand out as the generation that was entwined in, and who simultaneously embraced and precipitated, a more general cultural transformation in American religion and society (for example, Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1999). That the social forces of age and generation are currently providing significant momentum to religious change is underscored not only by the post-1990s shift towards disaffiliation but by its ongoing accelerated pace. While the initial discovery of the doubling in the proportion of religiously disaffiliated Americans (Hout and Fischer 2002), caught social scientists and pollsters by surprise, the continuing pace of this change is unabated. Within the five year interval between 2007 and 2012, for example, there has been a 4.3 percentage change in the ranks of the unaffiliated; the biggest loss in adherents is experienced by white mainline (−3 percent) and white evangelical (−2 percent) Protestants (Pew Forum 2012: 13). Although this pace may slow or stabilise or decline further in the coming years,