The Religious Situation in American Society – Contemporary Trends, Global Implications

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There are, of course, numerous aspects of the religious situation in the United States today. I focus here on only one issue: The question of the actual vitality of this situation. Is the current state of American religiosity as strong and vibrant as public perceptions assume and as some scholars assert?

I contend that the actual situation is overstated. Polling and survey data point to high levels of American religious belief and behavior. However, these numbers are of limited significance. They do not represent nuanced data. They do not capture social and historical contexts. Nor do they shed light on affiliation that is more cultural than religious and more an expression of compliance behavior than religious authenticity. Nor, as other scholars have pointed out, do statistics tell us what people really mean when they claim to be “religious,” or how their religious beliefs and behaviors change over time.1 Having said this, I am not arguing here that America is post-religious, or post-Christian, or that religion no longer plays a formative role in individual lives or American culture.2 It does. The situation, however, may not be as wholly religious as is currently assumed.

1. Aspects of the Current State

The assumption is pervasive today that secularization has made only limited inroads in the United States. Accordingly, religion in America.

2 One can, of course, find various proclamations regarding the alleged end of a Christian America. See, for example, Meacham, Jon, “The End of Christian America,” Newsweek (April 29, 2009) at http://newsweek.com/id/192583/output/print
is robust and pervasive. Two factors drive this assumption. One is the media visibility of evangelical Christians, notably their role in America’s “culture wars,” and as “values voters” in the Nation’s contemporary political life. The other is an assumption animating contemporary social science research, especially the work of scholars arguing rational choice or religious markets theory. Here American religious vitality is accentuated as an affirmation of a central axiom of religious markets theory, notably that religion thrives in a free-market religious economy, a situation contrasted with the tepidness of the European situation historically dominated by monopolistic religious economies.

1.1. American Religious Vitality

Perceptions of America’s religious vitality are hardly new. Alex De Tocqueville, a keen observer of America’s emerging national life in the early 19th century, was among the first to observe the nation’s peculiar proclivity for the “fires of religious zeal.” De Tocqueville reported that “the religious atmosphere of the country” was the first thing that struck him on his arrival in the United States.3 This “religious atmosphere” remained a vibrant component of the American experience throughout the 19th and 20th centuries – spawning a multitude of religious experiments, framing the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, and stimulating a host of social and political reform movements.

Religion in America today appears to reflect the same high level of cultural and social visibility. ‘God talk’ is pervasive in virtually every domain of American public life – in political discourse, civic forums, sport venues, and in our popular culture. By most current social science measures, Americans are a “more religious” people than many others.4 The 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports that:

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4 This, of course, is not a theological judgment about the authenticity of the American soul; it is a conclusion based on how social science operationalizes and measures religiosity. For contemporary trends see Kosmin, Barry A., and Keysa, Ariela, Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans (Ithaca, New York: Paramount Market Publishing, 2006); Roof, Wade C., Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion (Princeton, New Jersey: