

Why Religion Went Obsolete

The Demise of Traditional Faith in America

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Christian Smith, professor of sociology and director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, lays out a complex and thoroughly researched set of reasons for the decline of what he calls traditional religion in the United States for his audience of students and scholars of contemporary American religion. While other books, for instance, Jim Davis, Michael Graham and Ryan Burge's *The Great Dechurching*, Robert P. Jones's *The End of White Christian America*, and other scholarly literature have addressed the cultural and demographic factors influencing the decreasing size of Christian communities and the lessening of their cultural influence (notwithstanding the real continuing influence of certain voices in the Republican party), Smith argues a compelling case that "Americans have lost faith in traditional religion" (1).

Three technical definitions guide Smith's work. First, he defines *traditional religion* in sociological terms as long-established groups with authoritative texts, doctrines, and structures which would not be seen as fringe by mainstream American culture (2-3). Under this umbrella he includes all Christian groups and their historical offshoots such as Latter-day Saints and Unitarian Universalists. Groups that are not traditional include Hindus, Wiccans, astrologers, ghost hunters, and UFO chasers. Second, Smith defines *obsolete* as what happens "when most people feel [something] is no longer useful or needed because something else has superseded it in function" (4). For instance, in the telecommunications sphere, landlines have been superseded by cell phones. He notes that obsolete things might still "work," (e.g., manual typewriters) and have devotees, but they are nevertheless outdated. A third important term in Smith's argument is *zeitgeist*, the prevailing spirit of the times. Just as there was a certain culture matrix for "the wild west" or "the roaring twenties," we are now in what Smith calls "the Millennial zeitgeist" (12). Zeitgeists do not describe what is typical, but rather "the leading and most visible movements of people who are defining the cutting edge of cultural developments" (11). A zeitgeist belongs to the avant-garde, not the old fogies.

Smith's book is comprised of three parts. Part I notes the well-documented fact that the vibrancy of traditional religion has weakened. As evidence, Smith includes such measures as church closings and public sentiment about the ethical standards of clergy. He argues that Americans have approved of religion when it makes people *good*, by inculcating basic moral principles including tolerance, moderation, and national unity. He ends Part I by providing a set of eight interpretive frameworks for thinking about the culture changes that brought about the demise of traditional religion. For instance, obsolescence may be understood as the effect of a cultural mismatch between what religion offered and the prevailing zeitgeist of the 1990s. Or obsolescence could be explained as the accumulation of "floating cultural material" (65) that subtly led most Americans away from traditional religion.

Part II traces the demise of traditional religion from the 1990s to the present day. In the 1990s, long term trends like intensifying individualism, mass consumerism, and the decline of the "traditional" American family (a married heterosexual couple and their children) combined with the digital revolution, pop postmodernism, and the acceptability of not being religious produced a new zeitgeist with little use of religion. In the new century, cultural changes like the war on terror, which associated religion and violence in the popular mind in new way, and the mainstreaming of LGBTQ+

identities also moved the zeitgeist away from traditional religion, which continued to feel the fallout of scandals such as the Catholic hierarchy's complicity in clergy sexual abuse. Smith argues that there was no organized plot to discredit religion, despite the short-lived new atheism movement. Rather, traditional religion suffered a death by a thousand cuts, as seemingly unrelated factors like the ubiquity of cell phones and the rising anxieties of young people about climate change, the war on terror, and their economic well-being combined to make traditional religion feel out of touch with their lives.

Part III describes a millennial zeitgeist characterized by disappointment, distraction, and moral relativism. This zeitgeist produces people focused on themselves rather than on shared social goals or the ten commandments. In this zeitgeist, traditional institutions (like churches and schools) are always suspect because they seek to hamper self-exploration and discovery. Smith further argues that this zeitgeist has not complexly lost a sense of mystery, but that more Americans are finding meaning in expressions like "the occulture." He writes, "belief in supernatural, enchanted, magical, esoteric, occultic and sometimes dark ideas had, by 2023, become astonishingly common" (325). Such ideas have little in common with the Nicene Creed, the Social Principles of the Methodist Church, or any papal encyclical.

Why did religion become obsolete? The short answer is "that traditional religion's picture of reality did not resonate with most of those who soaked up the [current American] zeitgeist" (337-338). The later one's year of birth, the more likely they are to have been profoundly shaped by the ascendent zeitgeist. Smith notes that his multi-factor explanation for the obsolescence of traditional religion differs markedly from secularization theories (368-369). Those theories argued that the indisputable light of science would eventually banish the darkness of all religious superstition. Smith's explanation is preferable, he argues, because it better explains "the relocating and morphing of religionish things to nontraditional sites and expressions" (369). Religion as our yearning for deep meaning is not obsolete; traditional religion is.

Timid scholars do not propose bold interpretations as Smith does in this book. Although highly interpretive, Smith's argument is grounded in a mass of data. Quantitative data, such as statistics documenting the shrinking of mainline denominations and the increase in persons who affirm that they are spiritual but not religious, and qualitative data, such as interviews with more than 200 adults (13-14) and four focus groups of millennials (15), ground his work. In addition, Smith uses counts of Google searches to estimate the rise of certain phrases and ideas in popular culture. For instance, figure 7.1 (225) shows a continued increase on searches for the phrase "spiritual but not religious" from 1995 through 2020. Figure 6.1 reports increased scholarly publications and books about postmodern ideas, based on Amazon, Google Books, and The Library of Congress (152). Thus, he uses "big data" as a proxy for the diffusion of new ideas throughout American culture.

The success of Smith's argument depends in large part, I think, on his ability to identify elements of the zeitgeist that, taken together, had the result of dooming traditional religion to the periphery of American culture *and* whether readers think that a zeitgeist explanation is preferable to secularization theory or some other explanation. Smith repeatedly notes that not every event or trend that happened in the 1990s or early 2000s contributed to the emerging zeitgeist, because by his definition (and etymology) a zeitgeist is more ghostly than substantial. He is also comfortable in thinking that causality can work in two directions at once (e.g., regarding how culture is self-reinforcing, as he discusses on pages 9 and 10). To put it another way, Smith's explanation about why traditional faith became useless is not because of billiard ball causality, where one can clearly track ball A hitting ball B and ensuring collisions. Rather, traditional religion's unplanned obsolescence is more analogous to more ingredients being added into the stone soup of American culture, resulting in novel flavors

and textures not necessarily intended by the cooks. Smith shifts between the interpretive metaphors he describes in Part I of the book, depending on which one fits the particular piece of the story he is telling. Smith's way of arguing is sometimes maddening because of the sheer number of factors at play. He lists eight long-term trends contributing to the decline of religion, eight developments in the religious environment, and eleven factors emerging in the 2000s. If one acknowledges the complexity of culture, individual lives, and religious traditions, one should not be averse to explanations about changes in religious practices that are also complex.

As a Christian, I am troubled by Smith's explicit stance that sociology explains almost everything about religious engagement. For example, "religious leaders may hope that people are religious because they believe the doctrines are true. Surely that's the case for some people" (44). But clearly, not for most. He then goes on to talk about religion in fundamentally utilitarian and transactional terms: what social and psychological goods do I get for myself and my children for my being religious? These assumptions are a reiteration of his earlier work about the function of religion for Americans, which he calls moral therapeutic deism. Smith's confidence in sociological explanation leads him to assert that a revival of traditional religion cannot be achieved through "theological idealism" (reform in ethics and doctrine) nor by "program idealism" (reform in concrete practices at the grassroots level). Both forms of idealism, Smith avers, "are sociologically naïve" (20). Efforts to revive engagement in traditional religion will be as difficult as paddling one's canoe up a rapids. If Smith's analysis is correct, the task of religious people going forward is to live faithfully while acknowledging that the world thinks doing so is at best quaint and at worst foolish.

The book includes a companion website providing an appendix on research methodology and another containing interview quotations. This book will be a touchstone for scholarly discussions of traditional American religion. It belongs in the collection of your theological library.

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