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America's Changing Religious and Cultural Landscape and its Implications for Theological Education

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the changes in American culture that have made the very notion of religious communities and religious leadership an increasing challenge. Gathering, sustaining, and leading a congregation requires different assumptions and skills than when ATS was founded. Despite the difficulties, however, religious communities are essential, both to the faith and spiritual lives of their participants and to the well-being of the communities in which they are located.

In the early 1960s, few religious leaders probably realized quite what a turning point had been reached in American culture. At that point, the postwar glow of growth was still intact, with the baby boom just winding down. Church attendance was still at all-time highs, and the system of denominational organization that had been established a half-century before was reaching full maturity. Catholics were emerging into the mainstream of American culture, and each religious group thought it could count on a well-established organizational and cultural clergy pipeline from youth group to denominational college to seminary and back to the pulpit, perhaps with a detour for some time in a postcollege denominational mission posting. Whether things ever worked quite this smoothly is hard to reconstruct at this distance, but there is little doubt that when this journal was begun 50 years ago, ATS occupied a more predictable organizational and cultural world than the setting in which we do our work today.

There are many changes on which we could focus—financial challenges and declining enrollments in many schools, the changing demographics and financial challenges of students themselves, or the erosion of connections between denominations and their seminaries—but I want to focus this brief essay around two kinds of issues. First I will explore the changes in

American culture that have made the very notion of religious communities and religious leadership an increasing challenge. Why does it seem so hard to gather and sustain a congregation these days? Second, I will argue that, despite the difficulties, religious communities are essential, not to be discarded as irrelevant. I will close with some reflections on meeting the leadership and educational challenges of gathering those communities.

Changes in American culture

One of the most startling changes in the last two decades has been the “rise of the nones,” as The Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life project titled its report on the growing number of religiously unaffiliated people. One in five adult Americans now responds “none” to the ques-

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tion of religious identification, and among young adults, that ratio is one in three. As recently as the early 1990s, the number of adult non-affiliates was less than 10 percent, so this does represent a significant and rapid rise. Those who have long and eagerly awaited the decline of religion in “exceptional” America have celebrated with I-told-you-so fervor, while religious leaders have tended to console themselves with

the reality that few of the nonaffiliates are really hard-core atheists. People in the churches, in fact, often cite the rising chorus of talk about spirituality as a call to abandon declining institutions and join the seekers in pursuit of inner wisdom. Perhaps the nones have rejected religion for good reason, and we should join them in seeking spirituality.

It is a bit difficult, however, to discern just what to make of that “spiritual-but-not-religious” talk that seems so pervasive. Whatever it means, the people in that category are not the same as the nones. Only about a third of the spiritual but not religious are unaffiliated; half attend worship with at least some regularity, two-thirds say religion is at least somewhat important to them, 70 percent pray at least occasionally, and nearly all of them believe in God. There is even a conservative evangelical version of this based on the notion that what matters is one’s relationship with Jesus,

not one's membership in a religion. The vast majority of the people who say they are spiritual also say they are religious, and even the ones who say they aren't are likely to look religious by most conventional measures.

Are the unaffiliated, then, spiritual seekers? Actually, no. Pew describes them as "nothing in particulars." They are no more likely to believe in "alternative" spiritualities than are Christians and other affiliates, and when asked if they are looking for a religious or spiritual connection, they say no. If religious leaders expect this population to wander back to church someday, that is probably not a good bet. Nor is it a good bet to think that they have deep spiritual insight that is the future of the faith. Based on these surveys and on my own research, if I had to describe the people who claim to be spiritual but do not want to be called religious, I would say that they are open to the transcendent dimension in life and fairly sure that we aren't alone in the universe, but they have very little in their lives that actively connects them with a language for describing that or with practices that encourage it. They are lurking around the edges of religious traditions—often for political reasons as much as for religious ones. They have scant religious upbringing and few experiences of their own to discredit religious horror stories they see in the news; and if that is what religion is, they want no part of it.

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How did they get so disconnected? What church leaders in the 1960s had not quite seen yet was just what a transition we were entering. The “question-authority” generation may have finally settled down in the '70s and '80s, and they may have occasionally brought their children to church, but many of those children (today's young adults) never got the sustained religious education, tied to a single set of parents and siblings, that had characterized the earlier religious boom. Many of the social and cultural anchors that had historically sustained parish life had already begun to shift in the 1960s.

While residential mobility has happened at a roughly steady rate since World War II, recent declines in home ownership and recent decreases in

job stability have combined to make shifting memberships an even more constant fact of life for congregations. For young adults, the rates of mobility are much higher than for older adults, with one in six moving across county or state lines in each five-year period. With job markets and career paths far more unpredictable and relationships far less settled, young adults have fewer commitments to keep them in one place and fewer well-worn paths leading toward a congregation.

For all mobile urban dwellers, the nature of “community” is much less tied to geography than it was even for the suburban residents of the 1950s and '60s. The people who constitute a network of emotional support and everyday connection may be constituted around common interests and shared experiences more than blood and land. “Community” is something to be constructed rather than inherited, and that applies to congregations as well. People who live in cities have as many family and friendship ties and help each other out in similar ways to rural dwellers, but their ties are not geography based, and they may be maintained as much through phone, text, and Facebook as through face-to-face contact. In part, young adults are disconnected from congregations in much the same way they are disconnected from other institutions, and they are potentially connected to congregations to the extent that these new forms of connection become part of congregational life.

One of the other significant shifts in the American cultural landscape was also just on the horizon in the early 1960s—namely, immigration reform. The 1965 immigration law radically increased the flow of immigrants and dramatically shifted their points of origin. By the end of the century, the United States was home to as big a proportion of immigrants as it had been a century earlier, but rather than coming almost entirely from Europe, our new immigrant population began to bring a broader array of ethnic and religious diversity into our midst. We have become visibly aware that we are not just a Christian and Jewish country. At least as important, however, are the effects within Christianity itself. These new migrant flows have largely been from countries where Christianity is the dominant religion; and in other countries, it is Christians who are disproportionately present among the emigrants. So, while it is true that we are increasingly multireligious, it is also true that the larger trend is what Stephen Warner calls “the de-Europeanization of American Christianity.” Some of the fastest growing segments of American religion are Korean Methodists and Presbyterians, Salvadoran Pentecostals, and Mexican Catholics.

Both in seminary classrooms and in the communities graduates will serve, the image of a Euro-American male pastor serving a stable community of ethnically similar, two-parent families is now radically out of sync with reality (but amazingly tenacious as a cultural memory). In addition to the changing ethnic and religious composition of American communities, the very shape of family life has changed as well. At the end of the 1950s, half of all American households consisted of parents with young children; today that proportion is one in five. While the number of nonaffiliated people has risen in most demographic groups, straight married people with children, even those in the youngest cohorts, are almost as likely to be affiliated today as they were in the 1960s—there just aren't nearly as many such families out there. There are more blended families, of course, and families with same-sex parents; but most of all, there are more people living alone and more living as couples, both before and after children. In fact, the fastest-growing segment of the population is those over 80 years of age. Retired people today can expect to live for two more decades, but the culture, the health-care system, and the churches are not really ready for that reality.

All of these changes have wreaked havoc on the ways people have thought about forming communities and on the expectation that a congregation would be a central part of that community. As people have moved from place to place and job to job and relationship to relationship, the task of creating networks of support and mutual responsibility has become increasingly challenging. All of these changes have sent an increasingly disparate assortment of students to theological schools—young and old, shaped in congregations themselves and not, representing the increasingly

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diverse range of families, cultures, and theologies that make up American communities. When they think about the communities they have come from and the communities they will lead, there are many models in their heads.

Religious communities are essential

Despite the challenges, however, the things that happen in local congregations are more important than ever—to the individuals in them, to the larger society in which we all live, and to the faith traditions in which theological educators participate.

Even the nones agree that congregations and other faith-based organizations are important to the well-being of our society. Congregations are often the only spaces in which otherwise marginalized populations can celebrate their own cultures and organize their own public life. Congregations and their community partners are also critical players in the increasingly frayed safety net that protects the most vulnerable. They not only provide services, but they also mobilize advocacy and model what it means to take care of one another for the common good. People who participate give more, vote more, and volunteer more. The work congregations do even extends to mobilizing the energies of people who merely have friends who participate. When congregations are not present and healthy, there is a big hole in the overall social fabric.

Churches and synagogues are not just good voluntary community organizations, of course, modeling and passing along traditions of virtue that are critical to our larger culture. They are also the places where people are invited into an experience of transcendence and a relationship with the divine. If we care about the presence of faith in the world, the work of theological education must continue to include attention to the formation and leadership of collective religious gatherings, whatever form they may take. My own recent research on spirituality in everyday life has convinced me yet again that congregating matters. A life story that has spiritual content and direction is much more likely to come from someone who is an active participant in a religious community. For all the talk about people being spiritual but not religious and for all the lore about finding God in the woods, I can tell you that there are very few people out there who are truly pursuing a spiritual way of life without the help of a religious community of some sort.

People who carry their faith into the world are people who experience and practice the presence of faith in shared work and shared conversations. When communities gather around ritual and learning and common labor, they provide the arenas in which spiritual conversation and spiritual relationships happen. Those who are only moderately involved in organized participation get some of this benefit, but it is the active participant (no matter what tradition) who reaps the benefits of these fertile religious conversational spaces. While preaching, music, and education for their children are the threshold experiences that keep many people coming at a fairly regular pace, it is participation in small-group activities that provides the space for making the deeper connections—to other people and by way of the conversations with those people, between faith and life. Those who are on the margins of religious life, on the other hand, and still somewhat connected but inactive, are more likely alienated because a congregation has failed in its relational work than because they have ceased to believe. Connections and conversations are the building blocks of the new kinds of religious communities our best students will learn to lead.

Meeting the challenges of today's spiritual communities

Today's culture makes it exceedingly difficult to get people in the door of any religious organization, and the unsettledness of all our connections is hard soil in which to grow any sort of community. Being a religious leader no longer means stepping into a ready-made community; it means building one. Simply teaching the basic skills of preaching and teaching will not help students assemble the disparate pilgrims moving through the city to hear what they have to say. Simply ensuring adequate scriptural and theological knowledge may or may not help a student hear the halting questions of a young adult who has never been to church. Simply providing an accredited religious credential will not matter if the people who need to be gathered into a community have never heard of your denomination (let alone The Association of Theological Schools). All the things seminaries have learned to do are still essential, but they are no longer sufficient. Today's religious leaders have to invite people into a spiritual community where worship introduces connections to God, fellowship introduces connections to one another, and service introduces connections to a larger mission in the world.

In today's religious and cultural landscape, the people who leave our theological schools cannot assume that the spiritual community will already be there or that it will be healthy and intact. Both repair and new construction may be needed. As soon as a group has been built, it will have to adjust to the constant flux of new people and new challenges. Blessing people who leave will be as much a part of the task as welcoming new people who arrive. Networking by all means possible will be as much a part of a leader's toolkit as was the mimeograph machine of old. Although it may be much more difficult to gather a community, it is more critical than ever. The work of theological education is no less necessary—just different.

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