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TRACING RELIGIOUS BELIEF, PRACTICE, AND CHANGE

MICHELE DILLON & PAUL WINK

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1

The Vibrancy of American Religion

“If I had had the sense then that I have now, I’d refuse to live in Texas.” So declared Barbara Shaw when interviewed in 1958, at age thirty, five years after she had left Berkeley, California, with her young husband, an engineer who was returning to west Texas to work in his father’s prosperous ranching business.¹ Becoming part of a well-established Texas family with a beautiful home might have struck those who knew Barbara as a perfect match for what researchers described as her “flamboyant and exuberant” personality. In adolescence, Barbara was socially ambitious and self-confident, a disposition encouraged by her mother, who believed “there was no reason [Barbara] couldn’t be a member of Congress” and who repeatedly reminded Barbara to “always better” herself. Barbara’s marriage certainly landed her in a well-to-do and socially prominent family. Unfortunately, Barbara’s mother did not get to witness her daughter’s accomplishment: she died, much to Barbara’s sorrow, when Barbara was just twenty-three.

Barbara’s passions for socializing, politics, and public speaking found no shortage of opportunities in Texas. The girl who as a high school senior in Berkeley was president of the Associated Women Students and who in college had enjoyed an exciting social life was easily drawn into the civic and social activities of her husband’s family. But Texas was a

very different place from California. And Barbara had very little sense of what to expect, though her father had grown up in Texas before moving to the Bay Area to work in a successful law practice. The difference of place was crystallized especially in the religious atmosphere that dominated everyday life in west Texas. "It's a Baptist town," Barbara explained, "where you can't smoke, drink, or tell an off-color story."

It wasn't that Barbara was not herself religious. While growing up in Berkeley, she had in fact been very active in the Congregational Church's Winthrop Club and Pilgrim Fellowship, and had "thoroughly enjoyed" the church's local activities and regional conferences during high school and college. Indeed, in 1944, when she was sixteen, she told the interviewer from the Institute of Human Development that the man she would marry "must be religious and ambitious," characteristics that mirrored her own sense of self. But she was keenly aware in her 1958 interview that being a Congregationalist was very different from being a Southern Baptist, and especially so in the 1950s, when Baptists were renowned for their separateness from other denominations (see Marty 1996: 448-49). Barbara pointed to the very different hold exercised by the two churches over their members: "Church didn't have the same meaning to my family. You went to church and then you came home, or you were active in the various groups. But these people live their religion. Every member of the family is a good Baptist and lives it. They are self-disciplined, they give 10 percent of their income—every member does—to the church each year. I've learned to give my tithe too, out of my allowance. My husband's whole family is involved heavily and lives by all its Christian tenets."

Barbara's husband and father-in-law were deacons, her mother-in-law was the church organist and music director for local religious radio and television programs, and her children, according to Barbara, had been "going to Sunday school since they were a month old." With all the time and energy that Barbara's family were contributing to the church, it is not surprising that Barbara too became highly involved. She longed for California but embraced the social and cultural demands of her new environs. She and her husband were members of a religious film discussion group and, to her surprise, "Even *I* teach Sunday school classes" (emphasis hers). For her Texas Baptist family, "religion is their life," and Barbara was making it her life too. Yet she envisaged a future life outside Texas and back in California.

Interviewed twelve years later, in 1970, Barbara was still living in Texas, now in Dallas, and was enjoying her marriage and five growing

children. Her husband continued to be a “devoted Baptist” and highly involved in church affairs, taking the lead, for example, in planning the building of a new church. But Barbara, though still attending weekly church services, was significantly less involved in the congregation’s other activities. Throughout the interview she spoke a great deal about personal change and her growing maturity and independence. She had gained much of this newfound autonomy by carving out greater independence from her husband’s and the community’s straight-laced Baptist values. The change in Barbara’s attitude may have been influenced by the increased media visibility of the women’s movement and the do-your-own-thing cultural mantra of the 1960s. In any case, one of her rebellious joys was driving around her affluent neighborhood loudly playing Janis Joplin in her open-roof car. She was also somewhat resistant to the extensive demands of her church, commenting: “I used to do everything at church. . . . I was [a devoted Baptist] for fifteen years, and now I’m sort of out of the stage of ‘living for’ anyone else. I kind of do my own thing. And now I’ve all but given up. I just go to services and get my kids there. I go every Sunday, but I’m not real involved [in the church’s other programs]. I might be again, one day. But I’m not real involved right now” (age forty-two, 1970).

Although now doing more of her “own thing,” Barbara had not become socially withdrawn. She was still entertaining a lot, and among her diverse activities she organized programs for various women’s groups, such as lawyers’ wives, and she did some substitute teaching. Barbara had also resumed one of her earlier avocations—journalistic writing—and had started doing book reviews for reading groups. Her busyness now, however, seemed motivated more by her own interests than by her obligations as the wife of a socially prominent man in a culturally conservative city. Consequently, Barbara seemed more at ease and accepting of herself: “I guess I was concerned about the impression I made on others at one time. But now it’s really glorious. There’s no one I want to impress. I have a few, intimate good friends that I like. . . . I no longer try and impress anybody. I’m me.”

When interviewed in 1982, Barbara, now in her midfifties, spoke with a “noticeable Texas accent,” betraying her tacit acknowledgment that she would, of course, never leave Texas. But she still longed to return to California and buy a house so that she could spend an extended time there every year. Although fulfilled in her marriage and content in her Texas life, she confided, “I always wanted to live in California. That’s been a big shadow.” Despite this disappointment, Barbara led a

full life, continuing to be involved in women's groups and in reading projects, and she had also become an avid gardener like her father, who had tended a beautiful garden at their Berkeley home when she was growing up.

Barbara's husband's extensive religious and civic commitments continued, and they frequently used their spacious home and grounds to host Baptist events. All their five children—with the youngest now seventeen—were active in the church, and indeed Barbara herself was much more comfortable with the current religious services than with those she had first encountered in west Texas in the mid-1950s. As she recalled of that time, "People there wanted to know 'if I'd been saved in the Baptist Church.' And the biggest thing in town was the church. And dancing was sin. Cards were sin. And it still is dry. No liquor stores. No bars. . . . And the little rural Baptist churches, I don't think I could sit through so many of their tough sermons any more."

Barbara's experience of church in the 1980s was very different—the result not only of the fact that she had moved from rural west Texas to Dallas but also because the particular Baptist congregation she was attending was a more welcoming place: "We're in a beautiful big cathedral-type Baptist church, with a very enlightened preacher who is a good friend of mine with a good sense of humor. It's a warm, loving, wonderful church. And I'm very grateful for it." Barbara's sense of gratitude and affection for the church continued to grow, such that when interviewed sixteen years later (in 1998), she was highly involved in church and church-related activities. Turning seventy and enjoying excellent health, Barbara was attending services every Sunday and Bible study every Thursday, and some weeks she participated in additional church discussion groups and committee meetings. Summarizing the gradual evolution of her sincere commitment to the Baptists, she stated: "We are dedicated. That is something we do and we love. It is a part of our life and it is just great." Barbara acknowledged that she had not always felt so close to the Baptists. Recalling her adolescent involvement in the Congregational Church, she commented, "I loved my church; and my preacher, when I told him I was marrying a Southern Baptist—that was considered unusual—he said, 'I hope we have raised you to be of service to any church you join.' It took me a while, but it is a very good religion, and I have loved the people I have met in it." Although Barbara had journeyed far, from Berkeley to Texas, she was sufficiently grounded in church and in religion that, as so presciently predicted by her Congregational

pastor, she was able not only to adapt but to become genuinely committed to the Southern Baptist culture in which she was destined to live her adult life.

Barbara's accommodation of the Baptists and Texas culture did not, however, come at the price of self-denial. She continued to be the socially outgoing person that she had been in adolescence, and she managed to use her skills in an entrepreneurial way that allowed her to flourish in her new family and social context. In late adulthood, one of Barbara's main church-related activities was organizing fifty chapters of Mothers-of-Preschoolers that were funded by, and which met at, local churches. Barbara was very proud of her volunteer work with this nondenominational organization, and she said the idea behind the project was for older women to play a central role in helping and supporting young mothers. An accomplished public speaker, Barbara regularly addressed different chapters of the group, visiting Baptist, Catholic, Assemblies of God, Nazarene, Methodist, Presbyterian, and other churches all around Texas to talk about parenting and marriage. She was thus at the forefront of a local program that contributed to the nationwide interdenominational ties that have been forged among conservative Protestants and Catholics since the 1980s as they have tried to steer America toward more steadfastly moral "family values" (cf. Dillon 1995).

As might be expected, given Christian teaching on the sanctity of marriage and the renewed attention paid to family values in political activism, Barbara's speeches concentrated on strategies to maintain an intact and fulfilling marriage. One of the values she emphasized was the importance of young mothers staying at home when their children were very young. She also exhorted the young mothers to "honor and respect" their husbands, to "know their needs," and to tell them how grateful they were for all the material and emotional things their husbands contributed to the marriage. Barbara's message may seem jarring in a society where the equality of men and women is taken for granted though not always evident. But she insisted that what she was "trying to do is make the women stronger and more loving, because I think that—especially in a city like Dallas, where men go to work—there is always someone [else] looking good." Just as Barbara had managed to bend to a cultural environment that was alien to her cosmopolitan background, she wanted the young women she counseled to be pragmatic in adjusting to marriage and motherhood and to the competitive demands of the local culture.

AMERICAN RELIGION

We open our book with Barbara because her life illuminates the strong social presence of religion in America and its vibrancy in anchoring individuals and families over time as they encounter life course and cultural change. This is a narrative of American lived religion that is captured in our study's longitudinal data, gathered from Barbara and close to two hundred other women and men in interviews from adolescence through late adulthood. At one level, Barbara's religious behavior is straightforward. If we were to apply any of the standardized self-report scales that characterize much of the research on religion, assessing either frequency of church attendance or the importance of religion in everyday life, Barbara would get a consistently high rating on both scales during adolescence and throughout adulthood. Since her teens she had attended church services every week and had consistently devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to church-related activities. Yet we can see from her interview material that Barbara did not exhibit the sort of piousness, certainty of doctrinal belief, and unreflective conformity that some readers might associate with highly religious individuals.

In fact, Barbara's high rating on a religiousness scale, though an accurate indicator of her frequency of church attendance and of the important place religion held in her life, is at the same time deceptively superficial. It would give us no hint of the dynamism surrounding her lifelong religious involvement. It would give no clue that Barbara switched religions, moving from the Congregational to the Baptist tradition; it would give no hint that how religion is lived varies from one community and time to another; it would provide no suggestion that the meaning of religion changed for Barbara over time, from being primarily a social outlet in adolescence right through middle adulthood to being a more fully internalized attachment in late-middle and late adulthood; and it would tell us nothing of the fact that, over her lifetime of weekly church attendance, religion itself changed in tandem with other social, demographic, economic, and cultural changes.

The extensive interview data we have documenting Barbara's life show four relatively distinct phases in her religious commitment and in the place of church in her life. Her adolescence was a formative time of extensive socialization, and church activities gave her a religious identity while simultaneously providing an outlet for other social activities with her peers. We can think of Barbara's early adulthood—when she

moved to west Texas and started a family—as a phase of social compliance. Her forties, in contrast, were a time of rebellion—she was still attending church every week but was openly challenging its behavioral strictures and focusing on her own needs rather than conforming to social expectations. Finally, in the fourth phase, in late adulthood, we see a more integrated melding of Barbara’s inner religious feelings with her everyday social activities.

Each of these phases underscores the fact that religion—what it is, how it is expressed, and what it means—cannot be abstracted from other aspects of an individual’s everyday life and the broader culture. Rather, religious involvement intertwines with personality, family, work (whether paid or unpaid), and other everyday commitments, as well as with social and institutional change. It is more than just a coincidence that Barbara was socially compliant in the 1950s, that she was rebellious in the late 1960s, and that she was at ease with herself and her pro-family activism during the post-Reagan era of political attention to traditional family values. Because religion interpenetrates everyday life, its obligations and rhythms invariably mesh with the cultural mood and with the individual’s routines. On the one hand, the cultural demands of religion can be such that daily habits have to be stretched, as understood by Barbara, who worked to allow the church to blend into her life as intensely as it had for her Baptist husband and in-laws. On the other hand, for some in our study, family transitions and cultural shifts nudged them to diminish their commitment to the church.

Yet we should not be surprised that Barbara, a confident, outgoing, and sociable woman, was able to carve a niche in a conservative church that frowned upon partying and other social temptations. Religion—as it is lived—is malleable and responsive to individuals’ and religious institutions’ negotiation of their environment. Religion is about faith beliefs and doctrines, but it is also about social interaction. Going to church is itself a social activity, and teaching Sunday school, organizing fund-raising parties and events, and mentoring young mothers are but some of the many routine social activities that churches encourage. Such activities fitted well with Barbara’s personality and social status, enabling her to fully express her organizational and leadership qualities. In short, there is a sociobiographical and cultural logic to religion that shapes how it is construed and practiced, and this invariably means that how religion is construed and practiced is highly contingent on the pragmatic considerations and resources of everyday life.

Now let us consider a different representation of religion as lived by Jane Bell, another of the participants in our longitudinal study. Jane too was born in 1928; she had two older brothers and a younger, adopted sister. Both her parents were college graduates and were economically well-off. Jane's father was socially reserved—he preferred to spend his spare time reading rather than in social activities—but her mother was active in politics and community affairs, especially the League of Women Voters. Smart, independent, and athletic, from an early age Jane shared her father's intellectual interests and reserve more than her mother's outgoingness. Jane especially liked the outdoors—hiking and horseback riding—and at age sixteen, when asked what she wished she could have, responded, "What I daydream about is a large farm with stock on it and horses to ride, hilly country, and my horse at full gallop with the wind whistling through my hair."

Jane's father was an inactive Jew from a strictly Orthodox household, and her mother was an inactive Protestant. Jane herself was interested in religion and, during adolescence, attended informal church meetings and religious discussion groups, mostly at the Episcopal Church. Commenting on her religious interests, she said at age sixteen,

Oh, I'm very different from both my parents—they're atheists. I think about God a lot. I read the Bible quite a bit—that is, largely out of historical interest. And I'm not quite sure [of] what I believe, but I feel there is something in religion that is important even if I don't know just what or why. But I'm not an atheist as they are. . . . It seems to me that religion, and religious feelings and beliefs, could not have been so important throughout the course of history unless [religion] stood for something and meant something that was really fundamental.

Jane met and married her husband, a Catholic, while in college, and they subsequently had four children. When interviewed at age thirty (in 1958), Jane described her late twenties as the "absolute low" of her life because of the death of her father, her "steady rock," to whom she had been very close. His death, moreover, occurred at the same time that one of her children was diagnosed with a serious illness. To deal with her despair, Jane sought psychiatric counseling, and during the 1958 interview, she was somewhat optimistic: "I feel I'm on the way to some sort of solution and understanding of [the depression]. . . . I have to accept my life as it is." At the same time, Jane was wistful that she did not share her husband's strong Catholic convictions, something that she felt anchored him in ways that she was not. Although involved in their children's religious education, Jane said she was unable to bring herself to adopt such

beliefs. For Jane, God was “some nebulous force behind the universe,” and as she commented, she did “not feel responsible to a God.”

Pursuing her need to accept “life as it is,” Jane went into psychotherapy in the late 1960s. She also started participating in one of the many encounter groups that were gaining popularity in California during this time. Illustrating how sociocultural change and the new resources it injects into everyday life can effect individual change, Jane emphasized how important therapy had been in advancing her self-understanding. During her midlife interview (at age forty-two, in 1970), she commented: “I feel that my life has just completely changed—my feelings about myself, like about what I’m doing here on earth. And I’m still growing. I don’t think it will ever stop now. . . . I’ve never felt better about myself. I’m more confident, and I feel my identity very strongly. I feel I can do pretty much what I want to do. . . . I feel I’m worth something.” Further reflecting the therapeutic culture taking hold in America in the 1970s (see Bellah et al. 1985: 120–23), and her belief in inner awareness as a pathway to personal growth, Jane, when asked about future goals for her children, said she would like to teach them “to be in touch with themselves and their feelings.”

Paralleling her experiences in psychotherapy and encounter groups, Jane developed a sharper spiritual awareness. In the mid-1970s she grew interested in Eastern meditation practices that at the time were still relatively new to American society, having been ushered in as part of the post-1960s expanded spiritual marketplace that made non-Christian and non-Western religious traditions more accessible to the public (see Roof 1999). Jane’s journey illustrates the cultural intertwining of spiritual and therapeutic interests. It began with her attendance at a lecture for mental health professionals given by an Indian guru. Jane described her response to the lecture: “Something happened the first time I walked into that place, into the ashram. It’s an indescribable something, but I felt a real internal shift inside me. Something profound was happening, and I didn’t understand it, but I knew it felt really good” (age fifty-four, 1982). She experienced “the same joyous feeling” when she went to a friend’s wedding there, and after a few more return visits to the ashram, Jane embarked on learning meditative practices and subsequently began to engage in intensive meditation. One of the meditation rituals required the meditating person to bow and leave a fruit offering for the master, or guru. But as Jane explained, “You’re not bowing to him, because he’s only a representation of the self. It’s a sign of recognition of and respect for one’s own self.” Engaging in these meditation practices

had a hugely strengthening effect on Jane: "I was having some very profound experiences in meditation. I was experiencing a strength and a peacefulness and a protection that I had never before experienced, and it was all coming from inside me. I felt there was very little that I was afraid of, or that I couldn't do. I felt somehow protected. My whole attitude toward life became very upbeat, very positive, very cheerful, very altruistic; very little dismayed me." Jane continued to practice intensive meditation and to experience its emotional and self-affirming flow, and almost twenty years later, in her early seventies (at the time of her 1999 interview), meditation and other spiritual rituals continued to be a regular and highly meaningful part of her life.

One of the motivations behind Jane's attendance at that first Eastern spirituality lecture was that she herself had trained as a family therapist in the early 1970s. For Jane, being a clinician was rewarding not just because she was helping others but also because she found it helpful in understanding her own family dynamics, and it was integral to her own growth. At the time of the 1982 interview, she was doing group therapy with families. She was enjoying the work immensely and, importantly for her, also found it to be "part of [her] own healing."

At the same time, despite her preoccupation with her own inner healing, Jane's spiritual and therapeutic experiences also helped her to achieve a broader concern for others and their well-being as she aged. She carved out a productive career training other therapists, and she traveled extensively across the United States giving psychotherapy workshops until she retired in the early 1990s. Following her retirement, Jane became more involved in her long-standing artistic pursuits, especially working in her garden, where she had created some natural shrines, spaces that she regularly used for meditation. She also spent a lot of time writing poetry, painting, and sculpting. Importantly, she had also become an active volunteer. Prior to her husband's cancer and subsequent death in the mid-1990s, Jane had taught English to immigrants, had worked with undereducated adult prisoners, and had run a caregivers' group for families of Alzheimer's patients. Jane was proud that her work contributed to others' well-being. Additionally, as she noted in 1999, she took pride in how it reflected and increased her own growth: "I think the [family counseling] I did when I was working was terribly important. . . . I feel really good about that, and about the people I helped along the way. And then it's who I have become that I feel proud of too. . . . I have come to a greater depth of understanding and forgiveness. I'm in a whole different place because of it."

Just as Barbara's life highlights the strong hold of established religion in American society and its authority in anchoring individuals, families, and communities, Jane represents another important, though less visible, strand in American history and culture: the autonomous spiritual seeking of individuals who look for the sacred outside churches and who push the boundaries of personal and spiritual growth (cf. Fuller 2001; Roof 1999; Schmidt 2005; Wuthnow 1998). Jane was able to use emotionally painful personal experiences to push herself forward in her journey toward self-insight and spiritual engagement. And just as personality plays a role in influencing who is and who is not religious, it is also important in accounting for who favors a less church-centered spiritual path. Jane, as we saw from her comments in adolescence, had seeker tendencies from an early age. But even as introspective and psychologically minded as she was, it would be hard to imagine that she could have embarked on a fruitful spiritual quest were it not for the cultural changes of the 1960s and the rise of the therapeutic ethos. Demonstrating the way that religious and spiritual vocabularies and habits are critically shaped by the cultural mood, Jane was able to avail herself of newly accessible Eastern philosophies and practices as well as to tap into the increased popularity of psychotherapy. The fact that she was living in California, the wellspring of experimentation with alternative lifestyles and ways of being, no doubt further enhanced both the legitimacy of her personal quest and the range of resources from which she could profitably draw in order to meet her personal needs.

Although Barbara's religious origins were Protestant and Jane was from a nonreligious mixed marriage, they otherwise shared a relatively similar sociodemographic profile: they were two women born in California in the late 1920s to middle-class parents. Both women went to college, married successful men, had children, maintained cohesive families, and were active outside the home, one in voluntary work and one for pay. Yet they present two different, almost "ideal typical" ways of being religious. Barbara exemplifies commitment to an institutionalized or church-centered religiousness, and Jane demonstrates commitment to a non-church-centered spiritual seeking. In this book we give a lot of attention to comparing these two different, though overlapping, ways of being religious, and we are especially attentive to their implications for everyday social and psychological functioning.

The main point we want to make here is that, despite the differences between Barbara and Jane, both illustrate a critical dynamic of American religion: Religion as it is interpreted and lived in everyday life is

not rigidly concretized in ways that leave little scope for individual autonomy. The nature, place, and meaning of religion are highly contingent on the specific sociobiographical, cultural, and historical contexts in which lives unfold. Both Barbara and Jane illustrate that Americans are pragmatic in deciding whether and how to be religious. In making these choices, they find many supporting motifs and resources within American culture and its long history of religious vibrancy, resources that in turn help individuals construct meaningful and purposeful lives. As our data from the 1930s through the 1990s show, there is much autonomy in how Americans construe religion, church, and the sacred. At the same time, though it is not heavy-handed, religion matters a great deal in many people's lives, adding texture and meaning to their everyday reality, anchoring their personal and social commitments, and buffering them in times of adversity.

THE IHD LONGITUDINAL STUDY

We have a lot of firsthand, detailed personal information about Barbara and Jane because they are participants in one of the longest-running (and still active) longitudinal social science studies. The study combines individuals from the renowned Berkeley Guidance and Oakland Growth studies established by researchers at the Institute of Human Development (IHD) at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1920s. In 1928, as the spirit of scientific progress and modern culture enveloped America, Jean Macfarlane embarked on the Berkeley Guidance Study (GS) of child development, drawing a community sample of infants born in Berkeley in 1928 and 1929.² A couple of years later, her colleagues Harold Jones and Herbert Stolz initiated the Oakland Growth Study (OGS). They recruited a sample of preteens, born in 1920 and 1921, from five elementary schools in east Oakland close to its border with Berkeley. The OGS participants were studied intensively by means of a range of standardized interview, observation, and self-reporting methods until they graduated from high school in 1938–39, and participants in the Berkeley Guidance Study were similarly studied until they graduated from high school in 1946–47.³ The initial samples were equally divided by gender.

The men and women of the two studies were first interviewed in adulthood in 1958, when they were in their thirties. Shortly after the first adult interview, the samples from the two studies were merged into a single IHD longitudinal study (Block 1971), and its participants were

TABLE 1. DESIGN OF THE
IHD LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Age Periods	Older Cohort			Younger Cohort			Total
	<i>Interview Year</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Interview Year</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>
Adolescence	1934–38	14–18	160	1943–46	14–18	159	319
Early adulthood	1958	37–38	99	1958	30–31	138	237
Middle adulthood	1970	49–50	97	1970	41–42	136	233
Late-middle adulthood	1982	61–62	91	1982	53–54	149	240
Late adulthood	1997–2000	76–79	63	1997–2000	68–70	121	184

NOTE: Older cohort = Oakland Growth Study (born 1920–21); younger cohort = Berkeley Guidance Study (born 1928–29).

interviewed in 1970, 1982, and 1997–2000 (see table 1 for the study's time line). At each adulthood assessment, the participants were interviewed in depth about all major aspects of their lives, and they also completed lengthy, structured questionnaires. The study therefore has an enormous amount of data across multiple decades and encompasses a wide range of social and psychological topics, with detailed material on religion; family life and personal relationships; work, leisure, and volunteer activities; political attitudes and activities; and physical and psychological health. Today the IHD study is composed of close to two hundred women and men who have been tracked through intimate, in-depth personal interviews across their entire lives, from early adolescence through late adulthood.⁴

The progression of our study participants' lives spans the major social changes of the twentieth century (Elder 1981). Their childhood coincided with the Great Depression; they were adolescents in the 1940s, an era shadowed by the country's mobilization for World War II; they established families and careers during the 1950s, at the height of the postwar suburban boom; they encountered midlife—and their own teenage children—during the cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s; they witnessed the conservative resurgence of the Reagan era in the 1980s; and at the turn of the twenty-first century they were

living in a high-tech, multicultural society whose hallmarks were global trade, Internet communication, and a host of geopolitical and militaristic tensions.

We are particularly fortunate to have access to these individuals' lives and to the unprecedented opportunities for social science research afforded by the historical longevity and ethnographic breadth of the data contained in this long-term study. An additional unique feature of the study is that many of the participants' parents were also interviewed in-depth in the 1930s and 1940s. The parents' data thus provide an important anchoring perspective on the participants' childhood and adolescence and on the family atmosphere in which the participants grew up. Moreover, the parents' data are of further value in their own right. They offer a detailed historical portrait of adult lives in the 1930s and 1940s and, through retrospective accounts of their own upbringing, provide us with a window into everyday life in America reaching back to the turn of the twentieth century.

The study participants represent one particularly interesting slice of American society rather than being representative of the larger population of Americans nationwide. They were born in Berkeley or Oakland in the 1920s, either in 1921–22 or in 1928–29.⁵ The older cohort, therefore, are members of the exemplary “Greatest Generation” (so labeled by Tom Brokaw [1998]); they grew up experiencing some degree of economic deprivation due to the Great Depression, and they subsequently participated in military and war-related operations during World War II. The members of the younger cohort (born in 1928–29) were too young to remember firsthand the worst effects of the Great Depression and, as high school students, were too young to participate in World War II. Similarly, during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, the older cohort would have had a more settled adult identity and consequently were less likely to have been influenced by the social and cultural changes of that era. Nonetheless, though the formative impact of major historical events such as World War II differed in their lives (Elder 1981), both cohorts are members of the long civic generation of Americans, with the younger cohort making up the core of communally involved Americans—those who join more groups and associations, vote more regularly, and have greater trust in political and social institutions (Putnam 2000: 254).⁶ Almost all were White. Over half came from middle-class families and over a third from working-class families, and the participants themselves went on to secure higher levels of educational and occupational attainment than other Americans of their

generation (Eichorn 1981: 41; Eichorn et al. 1981: 412). Though there continued to be socioeconomic variation among our study participants, their comparative socioeconomic advantages persisted throughout their lives; as we discovered, most of the participants were economically secure, in good health, and enjoying highly satisfying lives in late adulthood (see chapter 8).

The majority (63 percent) of the study participants grew up in mainline Protestant families, especially Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, and Congregational. Testifying to the denominational diversity so characteristic of American religious history as a whole, approximately 10 percent came from nonmainline sectarian Protestant traditions that included Christian Scientists, Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Swedenborgians, and Nazarenes. Sixteen percent of the participants grew up Catholic, 5 percent came from mixed-religious households (e.g., Catholic-Protestant or Protestant-Jewish), and 6 percent came from nonreligious families. In late adulthood, 24 percent of the participants were not church members, and another group, representing about 15 percent of the participants, did not actively identify with a denominational tradition. Thirty-four percent were mainline and 9 percent were nonmainline Protestants, 16 percent were Catholic, and 2 percent were Jewish.

The proportional distribution of Protestants and Catholics in our study approximates national data. Three-quarters of Americans born in the 1920s identify as Protestant and 19 percent as Catholic (Gallup and Lindsay 1999: 17). The dominance of mainline Protestants in our study, though representative of the Berkeley-Oakland community in which they were born in the 1920s, is not typical, however, for the United States as a whole today. The main difference in denominational membership between now and the 1920s is not in the ratio of Protestants to Catholics, but in the trends within Protestantism. There has been a steady decline in the membership of mainline Protestant denominations, and a corresponding increase in evangelical membership.⁷ Our longitudinal data captures some of this change; we discuss in chapter 6 the small number of individuals in our study who had a postmidlife religious transformation in the 1970s and 1980s, nearly all of whom embraced an evangelical tradition.

Although our sample—with its predominance of mainline Protestants and a proportionate number of Catholics—does not fully reflect the more variegated religious diversity currently apparent in America, it nonetheless allows us an in-depth look into the lives of individuals

whose religious traditions are squarely located in the center of American culture and society. Even though there are far fewer mainline Protestants today than a generation ago, they continue to wield substantial economic, political, and cultural influence in contemporary American society (see, e.g., Ammerman 2005: 4–5; Wuthnow and Evans 2002). The use of the term *mainline* is itself an acknowledgment of the central place that the various mainline denominations occupy in the American religious establishment (Roof and McKinney 1987: 236). To a large extent, mainline Protestant theology, with its affirmation of individual authority, religious freedom, social responsibility, and the autonomy of church and state, captures the core values in American culture.⁸ Mainline Protestants are thus well suited to represent the broadly defined middle-class culture that permeates American life and to show how private lives and public institutions fit together (cf. Bellah et al. 1985: viii–ix). At the same time, the presence of nonmainline Protestants in our study, though they are few in number, allows us to note how they differ from and are similar to their Catholic and mainline neighbors.

We should also point out that, although this is a California sample, its men and women present very much as culturally mainstream Americans, notwithstanding the image of California as avant-garde. After all, these men and women were born in the 1920s, and they came of age before the culturally turbulent 1960s and 1970s. When last interviewed in late adulthood (1997–2000), they looked a lot like same-age Americans nationwide. For example, 81 percent of the study participants said that religion was currently important or very important in their lives; 49 percent of the participants self-identified as Republican, 30 percent as Democrat, and 21 percent as independent. These patterns closely approximate those of national opinion polls.⁹

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The IHD study has led to numerous publications, including books by Glen Elder (1974) on the effects of the Great Depression on the study participants' transition from childhood to early adulthood, Jack Block (1971) on personality change from adolescence to early adulthood, and John Clausen (1993) on the life-span implications of planful competence, as well as a volume edited by Dorothy Eichorn and colleagues (1981) on life in middle adulthood, and many peer-reviewed journal articles. The IHD data has also been used by Arlene Skolnick (1981, 1991) in her writings on the changing American family, and Erik Erikson drew

on his involvement in the study to derive his influential theory of identity (Erikson 1951) and, much later, used data from the study participants' parents to write about vital involvement in old age (Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick 1986). Despite the breadth of topics in the books published from the IHD study, however, none of the researchers gave attention to religion, the focus of the present volume.

The purpose of this book is to document the dynamic intertwining of religion with everyday life over time. We use our extensive longitudinal data, gathered over sixty years of individual life-course and cultural change, to highlight the vibrancy of American religion; individuals' autonomy in how they understand and practice it; its adaptability to changing individual, social, historical, and cultural circumstances; and its positive role in everyday social and psychological functioning. We embark on this errand with attentiveness to the social and cultural context in which religion is construed and practiced. We recognize the many transformations in American religion over time and are cognizant of the changes that have occurred in the post-1960s era. But we also attend to the historical continuities and to the continuities in individual lives in how religion is understood.¹⁰ In sum, because our data span much of the twentieth century and the major cultural and social changes that it spawned, our research findings allow us to see the continuities as well as the discontinuities in religion during this time. (We outline the religion questions in the appendix.)

The study's long time frame allows us to heed Philip Gorski's call for scholars to avoid truncating history in their assessment of changes in religion (2003). He argues that social scientists should use a long-term, rather than a short-term, historical perspective in assessing any evidence indicating support for or against secularization. Secularization, the idea that the significance of religion progressively declines with modernization and urbanization, is generally seen as following a linear and undifferentiated fashion.¹¹ Gorski argues for greater attentiveness to the fact that religion ebbs and flows over time. Any upward or downward trend at any given time may, over a longer span, he says, be cyclical rather than linear and irreversible. He also argues for greater attentiveness to the actual historical and sociocultural context in which religious behavior occurs, because (as his own research on Christianity in medieval Europe shows) the hold of religion is rarely all-encompassing.

Attention to the links between present and earlier times is hampered by the paucity of data available about the place of religion in

individual lives and in families in earlier eras. Our study, in contrast, has data from the 1930s (and further back, given the parents' accounts) through the end of the 1990s and thus provides a relatively long view on religion. This time frame is particularly significant because it means we are not confined to simply comparing the current moment with, for example, the fabled 1950s, a decade that saw remarkably high levels of church involvement (see, e.g., Wuthnow 1988). Instead we are able to capture the ebb and flow that existed before and after the 1950s and, by having this longer perspective, to make a more nuanced assessment of the ways in which the meaning and significance of religion changed over the twentieth century. By the same token, having access to sixty years of life course data for the same people means that we can document the continuities and discontinuities in individual lives over time. Our data thus allow us to attend to the dynamic nature of religion and to recognize that, while for some, such as Barbara, religion may be a lifelong presence, for others it may ebb and flow over time, and in either case—as exemplified by both Barbara and Jane—the salience, characteristics, and implications of religious engagement may take on different hues in different social and biographical circumstances.

Our book uses statistical and qualitative thematic data and individual case studies to accomplish three related objectives: (1) to document religious beliefs and practices across the cultural and life course changes taking place during the lives of our study participants; (2) to identify the similarities and differences between church-centered religiousness and a more individually negotiated spiritual seeking; and (3) to document the links among religiousness, spiritual seeking, and social and psychological functioning in late adulthood.

The first segment of our book provides a historical context by examining the everyday salience of religion in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, before the cultural upheavals associated with the 1960s brought about significant changes in Americans' religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices. We use our data to present a cultural snapshot of the variation that characterized religion in California in the 1930s and 1940s (chapter 2), and then focus on documenting the religious habits and attitudes of our adolescents in those decades and how their church activities fitted with the routines of school and the expanding consumer society (chapter 3). Of further historical and cultural relevance, we next explore (in chapter 4, based on interviews conducted in 1958) the extent to which a vocabulary of religious choice and autonomy was evident

among our participants prior to the 1960s—when they themselves were young parents in their thirties and living through the 1950s, the height of American religiosity.

The three subsequent chapters (chapters 5, 6, and 7) capitalize on the study's longitudinal life course data to show how patterns of religious commitment and the meanings of religion change over the course of the life cycle from adolescence through late adulthood. We first examine the life course patterns of church-centered religiousness in the sample as a whole and identify how they vary by gender, cohort, and denomination, paying particular attention to how changes in social roles (e.g., empty nest and old age) and institutional events (e.g., Vatican II) may determine levels of religiousness (chapter 5). We then move to consider the extent to which individual stability in religiousness, rather than radical shifts, characterize the participants across the life course, and we also explore whether the meanings attached to religious commitment vary from early to late adulthood (chapter 6).

Chapter 7 introduces a different type of religious engagement by examining evidence of spiritual seeking among our study participants. After we briefly review the meanings associated with spiritual seeking, we focus on the study participants' patterns of spiritual seeking across adulthood and discuss the early life-course antecedents that are conducive to spiritual seeking in late adulthood.¹² (See appendix.)

The detail in the IHD interviews on religion is matched by the breadth of the nonreligious topics included at each interview time, providing an unprecedented opportunity to investigate the relation between religion and wide-ranging aspects of everyday social and psychological functioning. Because of the increased aging of the American population and the growing attention that scholars and policy makers are paying to the aging process, we focus, in particular, on the late adulthood phase of the life course. Thus in chapters 8, 9, and 10, we investigate the links between religion and the everyday functioning of our participants as older adults. As we go about this task, we also engage more specific, theoretically interesting issues in regard to ongoing cultural debates about religion. We examine how religiousness and spiritual seeking map onto the personalities and activities of our study participants and onto their social attitudes (chapter 8). We also disentangle the purported association between self-absorption and spiritual seeking and examine the links among religiousness, spiritual seeking, and concern for others (chapter 9). We conclude the presentation of our findings by asking whether religious commitment helps individuals negotiate the

challenges of late adulthood (chapter 10). In particular, we examine whether religiousness and spiritual seeking are related to physical and psychological health and fear of death.

Focusing on the relation between religion and these various dimensions of everyday functioning in late adulthood enables us to identify the ways in which religiousness and spiritual seeking may enhance positive aging. Further, with late adulthood as the outcome, we also investigate the long-term power of religion in adolescence and in early and middle adulthood to predict social and psychological functioning in old age. Thus, as we document the links among religiousness, spiritual seeking, and psychosocial functioning in late adulthood, we also examine whether similar patterns can be predicted from the data on religiousness and spiritual seeking gathered at earlier times in the life course. We complete the book in chapter 11 by discussing our findings in light of American culture and by looking forward to the evolving contours of religion as the aging baby boom generation moves toward old age.

In sum, the purpose of this book is to shed light on the dynamic nature of religion as it is lived across time and adapted to changing life course and cultural contexts, and we do so by drawing on longitudinal, in-depth interview data from close to two hundred individuals (as well as using interview data from many study participants' parents). These data provide a window into individual lives and into the multilayered social, historical, and cultural settings through which those lives moved across time. The background limitations of our data—the fact that all but a few of the study participants were White, they were born in Northern California, most continued to live in the West, and most came from mainline Protestant or Catholic families—mean of course that we cannot capture the multilayered experiences of Americans more generally. Nonetheless, the breadth and depth of the IHD study make it an amazingly fertile furrow in which to unearth the riches that lie deep in the everyday lives of ordinary people. It allows us to follow these lives, to see how and why they may have changed over time or maintained continuity with habits of heart and mind that, in some cases, may have been in place as early as adolescence or young adulthood. Despite our instinct, as Robert Bellah and his coauthors observe, to think of individual lives as isolated and arbitrary personal narratives, lives are lived and yield meaning in shared familial, communal, and historical contexts (1985: 81–83). Lives intertwine with other lives and

with a social history that is, in part, crafted by people getting on with their ordinary everyday activities.

We chose to anchor this study by focusing on the place of religion in individual lives. But as we move through successive chapters, it will become clear that a focus on this domain of activity necessarily illuminates much detail about the broader sociobiographical and cultural milieu in which lives are lived. In short, by studying religion in American lives, we learn a lot about not only religion but also American culture and the interplay of individual lives and social processes more generally.