

## INTRODUCTION

# Winners and Losers

## *Restructuring the Religious Economy*

---

A revolution is transforming American Protestantism. While many of the mainline churches are losing membership, overall church attendance is not declining. Instead, a new style of Christianity is being born in the United States, one that responds to fundamental cultural changes that began in the mid-1960s. These new paradigm churches, as I call them in this book, are changing the way Christianity looks and is experienced.<sup>1</sup> Like upstart religious groups of the past, they have discarded many of the attributes of establishment religion. Appropriating contemporary cultural forms, these churches are creating a new genre of worship music; they are restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion; and they are democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The new paradigm can be found in many places. One of its most typical sites is within the numerous independent churches that have proliferated in recent years. These churches are contributing to what has been called a new era of postdenominational Christianity in America, reflecting a general disillusionment with bureaucratic hierarchies and organizational oversight.<sup>2</sup> Other new paradigm churches remain within existing denominations, but their worship and organizational style differ decidedly from those of the more *institutionalized* churches in their denominations. Indeed, some of these new paradigm churches disguise the fact that they even have a denominational affiliation.

Included in my definition of new paradigm churches are “seeker-sensitive” churches, such as Willow Creek Community Church in

Chicago or Saddleback Community Church in southern California. These churches are attempting to design worship services that appeal to those who do not usually attend church. I also want to include in the ranks of the new paradigm a growing movement of churches that identify themselves as part of “apostolic networks.”<sup>3</sup> These churches model their organizational structure after the religious leadership described in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles.

It is not particularly helpful, in my view, to use such theological terms as *evangelical* or *fundamentalist* to describe these changes in American Protestantism. Even categories such as *charismatic* and *Pentecostal* are too broad to capture the distinctive character of the revolution described in this book, although many new paradigm churches do embrace the “gifts of the spirit.” Nor do I find the terminology of religious “culture wars” very useful,<sup>4</sup> since many of the new paradigm churches cut across political and social issues in innovative ways.

To clarify the character of this revolution—which might even be viewed as the initial phase of a “Second Reformation”—I focus on three movements that I believe fit the definition of new paradigm churches: Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel. While there are differences among these groups, there are also many parallels (examined in chapter 2). All three movements originated in southern California, so I had convenient access to the “mother” church of each as well as to the founding leaders. But each of these movements has spread across the country—and increasingly the world—so I was not in danger of describing something that was only a West Coast phenomenon. (See appendix 1 for a listing of the geographic distribution of churches.)

## Winners and Losers in American Religion

---

The story of American religion is one of change. In 1776, for example, Congregationalism dominated New England, with more than two-thirds of the region’s religious adherents; by 1850 its share had plummeted to 28 percent.<sup>5</sup> Groups like the Baptists and Methodists emerged with a new style of religion that was more experientially based—speaking to the personal needs of people—and they rapidly won converts, attracting people who might not have attended an establishment church.<sup>6</sup> A similar shift is occurring today. Groups like Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel are ap-

pealing to people who otherwise would probably be only marginally involved in institutional religion.

One way of understanding this shift is to look at religion in economic terms, subject to market forces and market analysis. As Roger Finke and Rodney Stark state, "Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market. The fate of these firms will depend upon (1) aspects of their organizational structure, (2) their sales representatives, (3) their product, and (4) their marketing techniques. Translated into more churchly language, the relative success of religious bodies (especially when confronted with an unregulated economy) will depend upon their polity, their clergy, their religious doctrines, and their evangelization techniques."<sup>7</sup> This marketplace perspective is useful for describing the growth of movements such as Calvary, Vineyard, and Hope, although one must never minimize the *religious experience* of participants and their stories of encounters with the sacred.

I argue that not only are new paradigm churches doing a better job of responding to the needs of their clientele than are many mainline churches, but—more important—they are successfully mediating the sacred, bringing God to people and conveying the self-transcending and life-changing core of all true religion. They offer worship in a musical idiom that connects with the experience of broad sectors of the middle class; they have jettisoned aspects of organized religion that alienate many teenagers and young adults; and they provide programming that emphasizes well-defined moral values and is not otherwise available in the culture. In short, they offer people hope and meaning that is grounded in a transcendent experience of the sacred.

The very fact that these groups exist, and that many of them were born in the last two decades, confounds traditional sociological wisdom. A number of social theorists writing at the turn of the century in Germany and France thought that religion would disappear by the end of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Mistakenly associating religion with cognitive beliefs, they contended that the "irrationalities" of religion could not survive in an age of reason. If religion continued to exist at all, they thought it would survive only in the private sphere of life or among socially marginal people.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, however, many sociologists have concluded that this secularization thesis was simply wrong.<sup>10</sup> Religion is robust in many places in the world, especially in the United States.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, religion is constantly changing its shape and form; indeed, the mistake

some people make is to interpret a decline in particular institutions (such as mainline Protestantism or the Roman Catholic Church) as implying the demise of religion more generally. Instead, there seems to be something deep within the human spirit that seeks self-transcending experiences and an ultimate grounding for the meaning of life. When established religions do not serve these needs, religious innovation occurs.

Gallup polls from the last quarter century make it obvious that Americans are a highly religious people. About 40 percent of adults claim to have attended religious services within the last week; 69 percent say they belong to a church or synagogue; and 95 percent profess a belief in God.<sup>12</sup> There are 300,000 congregations in the United States, and religion is a \$100 billion dollar industry annually, when contributions and religion-related sales are taken into account. But these statistics do not tell the full story. When one examines the details of this thriving religious economy, one finds definite winners and losers as individuals make consumer choices about which group to join.

The so-called mainline denominations are clearly losing their market share.<sup>13</sup> In the past several decades denominations such as the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians have lost between 20 and 40 percent of their members. These churches are filled with gray heads, having failed to maintain the loyalty of those who grew up in these churches in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>14</sup> And without this new generation of leadership, it is uncertain whether they can transform their worship and organizational style to attract a youthful and ongoing following. This uncertainty is the focus of the final chapter of this book.

Research indicates, however, that many conservative churches have been doing quite well during the same period.<sup>15</sup> The Southern Baptists, for example, have grown steadily, forming numerous new congregations in the last several decades. A host of smaller “evangelical” and “high-demand” denominations are also growing. The pastors of these conservative churches present unambiguous answers to the moral and philosophical quandaries of postmodern society. They also offer a constantly evolving menu of programs that respond creatively to people’s needs. In addition, they have been enterprising in building gymnasiums and hiring youth directors to engage the children of their congregations.

And then there are some surprises. Groups once marginal to the religious landscape, such as the Mormons, have exploded with growth.<sup>16</sup> They have high birthrates, which also help to explain the growth of conservative evangelicals,<sup>17</sup> but more important, they seem to understand the importance of nurturing family life. Furthermore, their mar-

keting plan makes even the Jehovah's Witnesses look anemic, as the Mormons send self-financed volunteers on two-year missionary stints throughout the world.

The Pentecostals, traditionally associated with the lower classes, are another group no longer at the margins. Drawing on theories of social deprivation, sociologists have typically portrayed Pentecostals as people who need a little ecstasy in their lives to compensate for the daily struggle for survival.<sup>18</sup> These sociologists were therefore unprepared when the Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal groups started to attract middle-class adherents. And I believe everyone was surprised when large numbers of Roman Catholics in both the United States and South America decided to abandon their ritualistic churches for the spontaneous worship of the Pentecostals.<sup>19</sup> Who would have predicted that Pentecostalism would grow faster than, say, Islamic fundamentalism, with more than 400 million adherents worldwide, including expansion in Africa as well as South America?<sup>20</sup>

Amid this proliferation on the religious right, another movement was occurring. A number of well-educated younger Americans chose to drop out of organized religion altogether or turned to Eastern religions, such as Hinduism or Zen Buddhism, which were antithetical to the capitalist values embodied in American Christianity. Their consciousness had been shaped by the anti-establishment sixties and seventies, and they viewed institutional, "man-made" religion as simply serving the self-interest of the clergy, who needed an institution to pay their salaries. "Why not access the sacred directly?" they asked. "Who needs paid mediators—especially ones who parade around in archaic clerical clothes?" These baby boomers have not lost interest in a spiritual quest, and neither have their children; their disillusionment is with "religion," which they identify with hierarchical authority and sterile ritual.<sup>21</sup> In their view, God and ultimate reality are to be found in a personal quest for wholeness, which may draw on the great religious traditions, but is not limited by their claims of exclusivism.

This social context has affected the place of Catholicism within the American religious economy. Initially, Catholicism took a substantial cultural "hit" and weekly church attendance plummeted more than 20 percent between the mid-sixties and the early eighties. Thousands of priests and nuns left their vocations and entered secular jobs.<sup>22</sup> For those who remained, life changed dramatically after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. The habits of many nuns came off. Laypeople's roles in the church expanded. Dialogue with other faiths

began. But just as the church was becoming more “relevant,” recruitment to the priesthood fell off dramatically, and polls showed a widening gap between the views of people in the pews and the doctrines preached by the hierarchy. Declines in attendance have now leveled off; Catholics attend church at about the same rate as Protestants, and in surveys of moral views and practices they increasingly resemble Protestants.<sup>23</sup> But if mainline Protestants are worried about their survival, the anxiety level of the leaders of the Catholic Church is presumably even higher, in spite of their frequent reassertions of traditional dogma and even though Catholics are by far the largest denomination in America, constituting a quarter of the population. The disjuncture between what lay members believe and practice and what the clergy preaches cannot be maintained forever.

Left out of this sketch so far is any attention to Jews, who make up about 2 percent of the U.S. population (incidentally, the same as the Mormons). Many of the tensions I have described are mirrored in Judaism; in particular, orthodoxy has a surprisingly strong appeal and the liberal Reform branch is struggling with some of the same issues as mainline Protestantism is.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is time to revise the notion of a “Protestant-Catholic-Jewish America.” There is some speculation, for example, that Muslims will equal the number of Jews in the United States within a few years. Indeed, if we count the growing percentage of religious “nones” (those without any religious affiliation)—now about 8 percent, up from 2 percent only thirty years ago—the religious mosaic becomes even more complex.

## A Personal Pilgrimage

---

Before launching into the fascinating story of the people who have joined new paradigm churches, I want to identify my personal relationship to these groups as well as to say a few words about the research for this book. In the early 1980s I wrote a book entitled *The Case for Liberal Christianity*, which in many ways represented the age-old quest to make sense out of one’s faith during a period of substantial social change.<sup>25</sup> The book was the product of a young mind trying to pick up the pieces from a graduate education in religious studies. Most of my “true believer” understandings of God and the Bible had been destroyed. I had joined a large liberal Episcopal church where the con-

gregation worried more about social justice than about purity of doctrine. And I was relieved to have found a religious community where I did not need to check my mind at the door when I entered to worship.

In fact, I counted myself lucky to still consider myself a Christian. Many of my fellow students viewed religion as a cosmic projection by which people cope with the anxieties of life. While I agreed that religion (as an institution) was a social construction, I believed that something transcendent empowers man-made religious symbols and potentially gives meaning to the lives of individuals. Nevertheless, I knew that something was missing in my attempt at a cognitive justification for religion, so I vowed shortly after the publication of *Liberal Christianity* to shelve all attempts at writing theology until I was retired and had earned the right to engage in speculative reasoning. Instead, I turned my attention to several highly tangible issues—first genocide and then homelessness—to escape the intellectual challenges of the Christian faith.<sup>26</sup>

After a decade of retreat I found myself asking the Lilly Endowment to fund a project analyzing a phenomenon observed by some of my undergraduate students in the sociology of religion. For several years I had read in my students' term papers about churches that were teeming with teenagers like themselves, played rock music that people could dance to, and met in unconventional places. After visiting a few of these churches, I realized that something worth researching was brewing in southern California. The Jesus movement of the 1960s was long over. Although some of these churches had their roots in that movement, they were decidedly part of the 1990s. Gone were the religious hippies, and in their place were young parents trying to make sense out of the urban environment in which they were rearing their children. These churches preached an old-fashioned gospel, but their music and form of worship were radically contemporary, and their mood was quite different from that of the typical evangelical and fundamentalist churches I had visited.

On receiving a grant I felt some ambivalence. I had vowed to ignore theology for at least another thirty years; yet how could I do so given the biblical literalism of the churches I proposed to study? By this time I had been to enough meetings to know that these worshippers believed not only in the Holy Spirit, but also that Jesus was still in the business of healing people. Furthermore, they believed in demons—and were even casting them out! Yet I had demythologized for myself most of the supernatural elements of Christianity and settled into the Social Gospel emphasis of my own Episcopal church. Would I be willing to spend the next several years attending worship services where people raised their

hands in praise, spoke in tongues, and consulted God on the most minute details of daily living?

## The Research Agenda

---

In the five years since this project was launched, many of my initial assumptions have been radically altered. After a few dozen visits to these churches, I no longer found it strange that they involved the body as well as the mind in worship. When I asked permission to study the three groups that became the focus of this project, I was disarmed by the leaders' lack of defensiveness. They gave me and my research assistants total access to meetings we wanted to attend (something that would give pause to many of my liberal coreligionists). Although I never accepted the biblical literalism of these churches, I did discover the power of contemporary music to communicate the sacred, and I found myself genuinely moved by the members' stories of personal transformation and healing.

After being involved in the project a few months I realized what was missing in *The Case for Liberal Christianity*: it was devoid of any real understanding of the emotional and bodily dimension of religion. I had wrongly assumed that the mainline Protestant denominations were losing members because of the dissonance between their faith and the culture. Now I realized that part of the problem was the focus on rationalized beliefs. During graduate school, reading theology, I had assumed that truth was something that could be captured in a doctrinal or philosophical statement. My exposure to these rapidly growing churches taught me that religion is more than assent to well-formulated beliefs. Indeed, I started to wonder if I had the cart before the horse: if, instead, beliefs emerge out of experience. Perhaps I had not made the transition into our postmodern world: I was still dichotomizing mind and body, identifying religion more with the head than with the broader range of senses that are incorporated in worship.

My goal in writing this book, however, is not to put forward my own theology, but instead to describe the pastors and churchgoers in the three movements. Although I do not accept all the teachings of these groups, I believe they have connected with the "spirit" of Christianity in ways that my liberal colleagues sometimes miss—or perhaps fear. Their growth can be attributed to their ability to communicate the sa-



cred in profound and life-changing ways and to embody this experience in postmodern organizational structures.

Throughout this book I have attempted to avoid cynicism, which is the stock in trade of many sociologists of religions. Furthermore, I decided not to make this book a critique of the three movements I studied, believing rather firmly that the declining mainline churches have something to learn from Calvary, Vineyard, and Hope. While it would be easy to criticize certain aspects of these groups from my liberal political perspective, I have instead attempted to understand them—especially the ways in which they are responding to the major cultural crises of our time—leaving the critique to the reader.

In January 1991 I received my grant to study what I called “rapidly growing non-mainline churches.” I hired two primary research assistants: Paul Kennedy, who focused much of his attention on the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Brenda Brasher, who studied Calvary Chapel.<sup>27</sup> For two years we interviewed members of these groups and their leaders: Chuck Smith from Calvary, Kenn Gulliksen and John Wimber from the Vineyard, and Ralph Moore, the founder of Hope Chapel. We also attended numerous worship services, Bible studies, healing conferences, baptisms, and other meetings. In all, we tape-recorded and transcribed 200 interviews, and we also wrote detailed field notes on more than 200 events. We distributed lengthy questionnaires to people attending four large congregations, mailed questionnaires to all the senior pastors in the three movements, and distributed “testimony” forms at several Vineyard healing conferences.<sup>28</sup> In the chapters that follow I draw on all these sources.

In spite of the differences among Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Fellowship, and Hope Chapel, in most chapters I have emphasized their points of commonality. Separate books could be written on each of these movements, and perhaps in time they will be, but to highlight individual movements would have meant focusing on specific personalities much more than on the religious and cultural significance of these groups, which is my intent in this book.